

Ultimate Prize

Sunday 21 October 2018

Introduction

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be always pleasing to you, our Lord and redeemer. Amen

After last week's passionate passage in which Paul speaks so eloquently and powerfully about the centrality of Christ crucified for everything he now does and is, this week we reflect on another key theme of Paul's letters: the enemies within and without – if I can put it that way.

Paul starts off by making it clear that even he, Paul, is not there yet. V 12 “not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal.” He is only too aware of his own shortcomings and that there is still some way to go before he obtains the ultimate prize for which God has called him. He knows that life in Christ, sharing his sufferings, experiencing the power of his resurrection entails a constant, focused and determined search for perfection. Not ‘to be perfect’ but rather to be ‘perfected’, made whole by God to reflect his purpose, his creation.

Here Paul is, I think, trying to encourage the church at Philippi. Even though he is imprisoned in Rome, even though he is suffering for Christ's sake, even though he has done so much to preach Christ crucified and spread the word, even given all of this, he Paul stills fall short. Although sometimes Paul can be accused of being somewhat arrogant, sometimes speaking with false modesty, here he seems to have genuine humility, authentic self- criticism: v 13
‘brothers and sisters I do not consider myself to have obtained that state which

Christ wants for me'. And this recognition is critical for what Paul has to say next. For the fundamental point for Paul is to encourage the nascent Christian community to focus on the right things, on the right behaviour, on the real prize – which is life in Christ Jesus. If even I Paul am still short of this state, by implication, how much further must we all must be, and if anyone is pretending otherwise then they are clearly not preaching the gospel of Christ crucified.

The heart of our passage this morning contrasts Paul's single-minded, laser like focus on 'one thing' as he puts it, 'forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead', aiming for the prize, contrasting this with what other people in the community at Philippi are preaching. Yet again Paul finds himself in the position of trying to bring people back to the path of Christ. Yet again he is trying to encourage the young churches to focus, to remember what they have been taught in the name of Christ crucified, and to persist in the faithful discipleship that they have learned from Paul and his missionary colleagues. It must have been so dispiriting for Paul, so soul destroying and frustrating, constantly to receive messages of how the churches he had strived so hard to build up, were falling away, riven with internal rivalries and in-fighting. As he says in v 18: 'for, as I have often told you before, and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.'

And this is his key point in this passage. Remember what I have told you, remember what my friends in Christ have told you, remain steadfast, do not be taken in, seduced by these other voices. All you should care for, all I Paul have cared for, is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection. Do not listen to these others and he is bitterly critical of them, v.19: 'their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is their shame. Their

mind is set on earthly things but our citizenship is in heaven.’ It is as if he is trying to provide the Christians at Philippi with a basic test – you can tell these charlatans apart by what they prioritise, by how they live and by what they strive for.

Clearly there were strong factions within the community who were trying to draw the faithful away from Christ. Remember that many of those living in Philippi were particularly proud of being Romans, of Philippi’s status as a Roman colony and maybe some in the community were focusing on these aspects which set them apart from others, giving themselves airs and graces rather than worshipping together all as equals as followers of Christ Jesus. So Paul reminds the Philippians that they need to focus as single-mindedly as he does on God’s call to the life above in Christ Jesus. Because, for Paul, nothing else matters.

And in this way, I think, Paul’s message is as direct, as relevant and as challenging today as it was when it was received by the Christian community at Philippi. It doesn’t take much reflection, I think, to realise how prevalent, how persistent and how insidious is the constant bombardment from the enemies of the cross of Christ as Paul puts it. In Philippi, their god was their stomach but an alternative translation has it as ‘appetite is their god’, which I think is a more accurate reflection of today’s challenges to faith. Pursuit of the body beautiful, the striving for the most Instagram followers, the cult of the famous for being famous – we are surrounded by the deification of earthly perfection. And let’s not pretend that life is any better in Christian communities – there are at least as many imperfections within the faithful, at least as many arguments between Christians, never mind all the horrendous things that have

been done and are being done in the name of Christ. Paul would be as horrified today as he was then about the behaviour of the faithful.

And yet Paul's message to the Philippians is as relevant, as challenging and as inspiring for us as it was for them. What we need to do is to focus on one thing: forget what is past, 'strain for what is ahead', focus on our goal which is the prize God has waiting for us in Christ Jesus. And, we need to remember that this prize is not like a prize at school prize days in which only some receive recognition, it is not a prize won in a competition in which for one to win others have to lose. No, quite the contrary, and absolutely fundamentally this prize is available to all. It is not a winner takes all, it is not exclusive, it is not competitive. The grace of God, the sacrifice of his Son, the power of his resurrection are **all** inclusive, available to **all**, offered freely to **all**. As Paul wrote in Romans, all have fallen short of the glory of God, absolutely, just as Paul said in the first part of our passage, even he Paul is a long way off.

BUT, and this is the key point, BUT all can strain towards the prize, all of us can press toward the goal, all of us can win. Can you imagine what a difference that would make to the world, to our communities, to all of our lives if we were able to focus on that one thing? We need to be able to answer adequately the question of a sorely missed friend of mine: what are you doing to change the world today? If we stand firm in the Lord, if all we care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection and follow him, then we will be building his kingdom – world changing!

In the beautiful words we sang earlier: 'when I survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were

an offering far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.' I pray that we may all do just that, today and always. Amen