

19th Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Philippians 3:4b-14. The Joy in persevering.

We are continuing to look into this marvellous letter from Paul to the Philippians, but first let's recap where we've been so far.

We began with Paul rejoicing in the steadfast faith of the church he'd planted in Philippi and urging them to live their lives worthy of the gospel of Christ. Last week, in chap. 2, Paul narrowed and tightened this focus by impressing on the Philippians to look at the very nature of Christ, the humble servant King, and to imitate Jesus in humility and service.

Today in ch.3, Paul is warning the church that if we take our eyes off trying to imitate Christ, we will start to have confidence in the flesh, and end up destroying the joy that is found in this new life imitating Christ's humility and servanthood.

Paul writes a lot about 'the flesh,' and it's important we know what he means when he does.

A lot of us, when we hear the phrases 'in the flesh,' or 'sins of the flesh,' think the writer is referring in some way to sexual sin or other 'sins of the body,' like gluttony or drunkenness. Living 'in the flesh,' or 'sins of the flesh' have nothing to do with these things as such, but it does of course include them.

What Paul is referring to is the pride that comes from *physical or family descent*, cherished by the Jews. That is, pride in who we genetically are, or the family we may happen to belong to. It also refers to the pride that comes from our own worldly achievements as enfleshed human beings.

This morning's reading opens with Paul saying, "if anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more! (4b). He then goes on to list seven or eight reasons for his confidence. He was, of all people, able to take pride in his physical descent. He was, and in his eyes remained, the perfect Jew. Circumcised on the eighth day of the tribe of Benjamin (whose territory allocated by God includes Mt Zion itself, Jerusalem).

He also had good reason to take pride in his worldly achievements within Judaism. Absolutely and resolutely enthusiastic in his prosecution of those who would dare to somehow dilute the traditions handed down by the ancestors.

More than that, a skilled lawyer specializing in traditional Torah Law – a Pharisee no less. In today's reading Paul is saying that this confidence in the flesh, more than anything, is actually what dilutes the power of the resurrection to transform the Philippians' lives.

The remarkable thing about the Beatitudes listed in Matthew's gospel (4:3-11) and in shorter form in Luke, is that God blesses those who could have no confidence in the flesh at all. God blesses those who have been let down by the flesh. Blessed are the poor in Spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek.

If we emphasise the 'flesh,' and our identity according to the flesh, then instead of stressing something that sets us apart from the world (holy = set apart), we only stress that which we have in common with the prideful world.

Now Paul, in these first few verses, sets up the rest of the reading. He is saying that if anyone could imitate Jesus by who they are in the flesh, then it's him. He is saying to the church, 'I tried to do this, trust me, it doesn't work, and besides, God won't let you get away with it.'

He then explains himself by using a wonderful example from life by using the analogy of an accountant. He looks at the profit and loss statement of life, if you will.

He lists all the things he thought were to his profit – all his debits, and there are all of those things I just mentioned at the beginning of the reading. All the things in the flesh he could be proud of. It is really impressive list. The wonderful thing about the example of an accountant, is that in today's western culture, this is pretty much exactly how lives are assessed. A successful life is seen in a healthy profit and loss statement. Look how much money I have in the bank! Look where I live and what I drive! Look what schools I send my children to!

And then in v.7, Paul says an extraordinary thing. In this ledger of my life, I now count all the things I thought were profit, actually as loss. Not only that, but Paul now "regard[s] everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ my Lord" v.8. What sort of accounting is this? What caused this erasing of all the things that gave his life actual, demonstrable, provable value?

Just this: Paul found something to put on the other side of the ledger that made all the others simply appear to be absolutely worthless assets. That something is, of course, *someone*. It is Jesus, the reigning King of Kings who, though coming as human and of flesh, did and owned nothing *in* the flesh.

This is what Paul means by having Jesus the Messiah as his 'profit.' Jesus has done what none of our assets, or the things we value in our achievements, could ever do. Paul goes further about this amazing 'profit' in Jesus. Not just knowing of him, but actually knowing him. (I know of our Prime Minister, but I don't actually know him).

All of what Paul thought were assets were in fact actually liabilities. By his own example he urges the Philippians to imitate Christ so that they may be found in him. This letter says the same thing to us today. Just as Paul used to find all his value by being "in Judaism," all value and profit is now found by being "in Christ."

Just as James Packer inherited all his worldly wealth by being *in* the Packer family, we inherit the entire Kingdom of God by being *in* Christ. Paul says elsewhere we become co-heirs with Christ! (Rom 8:17).

To end this reading Paul switches his metaphor from accountancy to running a marathon. Paul wants us, the Church, to know Christ at such a deep level that we know the "power of his resurrection" (v. 10). Paul writes that we get an inkling of this power the moment we believe, but we come into the very fulness of the power of Christ's own resurrection when we ourselves die.

So he writes that, even though he has not yet obtained the knowledge of the fulness of the power of the resurrection, he presses on to the finish line. He continues, (my paraphrase), 'the one thing I do *not* do is look back at all the ground I lost when I completely missed the start of the race, when I took a wrong turn and went kilometres out of my way, all the times I slipped and fell. But always to look ahead and strain forward to whatever lies ahead.'

This is what we too must do, and I can think of no better advice in living the Christian life. We have all taken wrong turnings in life, we have all looked for our worth in the flesh. But we can all put that behind us, like the runner in a very, very, long race.

In fact it is only by being 'in Christ,' that we *can* put things behind us. If we don't, we somehow pull out of the race, wretched in body, mind, and spirit. So, knowing that the power of the resurrection is the very same power through which our sins are removed from the ledger, let us all push forward with great joy in the race we have been given to run.

Amen.