

Christ shaped life and hope

Series: Philippians

Date: 11 June 2017, Trinity Sunday

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 36; Philippians 3:10-21; John 12.20-36

One of the strategies we used to use to teach our kids was the sticker chart. It works like this: outline clearly the behaviour you want to teach. When the child does that behaviour they get rewarded with a sticker on the chart. And when, say, they get to 10 stickers they get a prize and when they get to the end of the chart they get a grand prize, and hopefully by that stage they'd learned how to use the toilet or whatever it was. The sticker chart works by holding out something that the kids hope for, that they want to get. And this hope motivates and shapes how they behave. So often what we hope for in the future shapes how we live in the present.

Even though we live in a culture of instant gratification, delayed gratification has always been a mark of maturity. There are still some things that we have to wait for and for which we hope that can shape how we live in the present. It's why probably the fittest I've ever been was in the lead up to my wedding - because I wanted to look my best. Who says it's just brides who go on a fitness regime! What's true for little things is true for our larger hopes for the future. Place your hope in a comfortable retirement - that will shape how you work and save and what you do with your time. Place your hope in your kids and grandkids and that will shape your relationship with them. Place your hope in finding satisfaction in life in a romantic relationship or a career and that will affect how you approach your relationships and your work. The question for each of us is what do you hope for? Is it certain and real? And how does it shape your life?

In Philippians 3.10-21 the apostle Paul lays out for us his ultimate hope for the future and how this shapes his life in the present. In a world that cries out in despair Paul opens a window into the magnificent hope that God holds out for us in Christ. This text takes us deeper into the radical transformation that comes from following Christ. For those who are here and aren't Christians you'll get an insight into the difference Jesus can make in your life for the better. We'll look at 2 points: (1) Christ shaped life; (2) Glorious hope.

Christ shaped life

Our text today begins at 3:10, but we pick things up when Paul is in mid flight. You might recall from earlier in the chapter that Paul has been laying out the great passion of his life - knowing Jesus. Everything else, all that was to his advantage is a loss, nothing, rubbish compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. Jesus is the pearl of great price. It's worth giving up everything just to get him.

Now he continues in verse 10

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul takes us deeper into what it means to know Christ. And it's clearly not just a head knowledge. It's a powerful life transforming knowledge.

First to know Christ is to know *the power of his resurrection*. To know Christ is to know the incomparably great power of God at work in us through the person of the Spirit. For those who trust in Christ the same power that raised Christ from the dead, the same power that created the universe, that brought all things into being from nothing is at work in you. Paul wants to know and experience more of the work of the Spirit in his life. And he prays that we would know that too. And the primary way we know that is through the putting to death of the old life turned away from God.¹

Second, to know Christ is to know the *fellowship of sharing in his suffering*. This goes right back to the start of the letter and the idea of sharing, participating in Christ. But this is crazy right? Why on earth would suffering be something that Paul longs for? Suffering is a universal human experience, but we are perhaps more troubled by it than people in other cultures and times. For us living in an incredibly wealthy Western nation with universal health care suffering is incredibly confronting. Suffering is an affront to our autonomy. Suffering shatters the illusion that we are entirely free, masters of our own destiny, who can bend all things, even our bodies and circumstances, to our feelings. Even with the extended reach technology gives us, suffering presses our noses up against the limits of our power. And because of our reliance on technology and commitment to autonomy we don't know what to do with suffering. I think this is one reason why so many Western countries have embraced assisted suicide.

But Paul says that suffering is something he desires. Why? Is he some sort of sadomasochist? No. Nor is it because suffering in itself is good. One day God will bring it to an end. Rather it is because suffering has become a means to a more intimate relationship with Christ - *who shared in our suffering and bore our sorrows and suffered for us*. Knowing Christ radically reshapes how you approach suffering. The more you know of Christ, the deeper you press into him, the more you will be able to deal with the inevitable sufferings of life, and the more you will be able to enter into the sufferings of others to be with them and care for them.

This leads Paul deeper still. To know Christ is to *become like him in his death*. The word "become like" literally means to share in the same form or to be *conformed* to his death. Paul ties his own story with Christ's story. In chapter 2 we read how Christ being in the *form* of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing taking the *form* of a servant and being found in human likeness he humbled himself to death, even

¹ See Ephesians 1.18-20, 3.16; Romans 8.9-13

death on a cross. So now Paul wants his sufferings indeed his whole life to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. And the signal feature of Christ's life was his death. The Christian life takes the shape of the cross. Paul says *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.*² Jesus says that if you want to follow him you have to deny yourself and take up your cross. That's what it means to know Christ. His cross determines the reality of your life, how you think, how you feel, how you act, what you want, how you see the world, how you approach relationships, finances, parenting, politics, work, rest, play. Dying to yourself. Living for him.

No one said the Christian life would be easy. Or at least if they did they didn't get the memo from Paul or Jesus. The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that "when Christ calls a man he bids him come and die."³ But this is what Paul wants because it's a deeper intimacy with God, and it's only by the power of the Spirit at work in him that he can live the cruciform life. But even then this is not an end in itself. The goal is somehow to *attain to the resurrection from the dead*. The "somehow" is not a sign that Paul is unsure of God's promised future and whether he will get there. Rather it's that the future that God has promised is so glorious he scarcely dare to hope that he will get there.

Glorious hope

So what is so glorious about the future that God has promised? Paul speaks of it as the resurrection from the dead. And he expands on this in verses 20-21.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Did you get that? Paul says that if you're a follower of Christ - you are a dual citizen. Yes you might have an Australian passport, but your true home is heaven. That is, your true home is with God. But our hope as Christians isn't going to heaven when we die. At least that's not what Paul says we hope for. Rather it is this: Having been raised from the dead, Jesus has also ascended to the right hand of the Father. And one day he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. That's what we confess in the creed. But Paul continues, when Jesus returns *he will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*.

Paul says this side of Christ's return following Jesus means that your life is shaped by his death. It's shaped like the cross. But when he returns in glory we will be share in his resurrection. Jesus will raise us to life just like he rose from the dead - never to die again, with a transformed glorious radiant body that is fit for the new creation that God will bring in after that day of judgment when the old order of sickness and sorrow, sin and death is done away with. This is God's promise. This is the goal God is moving history towards. A day when his glorious resurrected people will enjoy uninterrupted union with him in the new

² Galatians 6.14

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM Press, 1959: 79

creation. This glorious hope to which God has called us. But it's only through knowing Christ that you can get there. Are you hungry for it? Do you long for it? It's a hope which ought to fuel us for a cross-shaped life. The only path to the resurrection is through the cross. For Jesus and for us.

Of course you could settle for something far less grand and glorious. You could exchange the cross-shaped life for something a little easier. Paul lays out the alternative in verses 18-19.

as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

Do notice that won't you. Christ's claims are exclusive. He says he is the only way to the Father. He is the only way to glory. But this is no excuse for pride or exclusive behaviour. It's only ever a tragedy when people don't choose him because he is life and light. And apart from him in the end there is darkness and death. That is not to say all sorts of earthly things aren't attractive to us. They certainly are. All sorts of things promise life and hope and satisfaction. Our problem as human beings so often is that we settle for satisfying the appetites of our bodies when we are made for so much more. These appetites can then come to dominate our life so that things we ought to be ashamed of now come to be the things we take pride in. It was true in Paul's day when they worshipped Mars and Venus. It's true in our day when we worship power and sex.

C.S. Lewis writes:

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁴

By contrast, can you feel the tremendous energy that is bursting out of Paul as he looks towards the infinite joy God offers us? He's secure in the God's grace to him in Christ, but that is no reason to rest on his laurels. Verse 12

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Christ is Paul's life and hope. He is the shape of Paul's life and he is the guarantee and shape of his hope. And every fibre of Paul's being strains forward to that day when he will see his Lord and Master face to face. He refuses to dwell on the past. Success will not enamour him.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory', 26, in *The Weight of Glory: A Collection of Lewis's Most Moving Addresses*, Harper Collins, 2013

Failure will not cripple him. He knows following Christ is a marathon, not a sprint, but his eyes are firmly fixed on the finish line and he is going to keep pressing on till he gets there.

The question for you and for me is - is Christ your life and hope? Is your life being conformed to his death? Is your prayer each day, "Lord help me die to myself and live to serve Christ and my neighbour?" Are you straining towards that day when you will hear those words from God himself, "Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master." For those of you who are older, let me say this: keep pressing on! Now is not the time to sit back and enjoy your retirement! There is more of Christ to be had! His kingdom is still being built. What part are you going to play in that? What spiritual legacy will you leave in the lives of your family? In the life of this church? How can you die to yourself and give yourself for the sake of Christ? And don't let me hear you say you're too old, because at the very least and at the very greatest you can pray. And we need your prayers. St George's needs prayers. Your family needs prayers. For those of you who are younger, will you pursue Christ and let him shape your life now? Imagine the intimacy you will grow into over a lifetime of pressing into Christ. Imagine the transformation he will bring in you, imagine the impact you can have for his kingdom over a lifetime of dying to yourself and letting his life shine through you. For those of you who aren't Christians, are you fooling around with entertainment, and pleasure and ambition, to stave off the gnawing fear that one day you will die? There is hope. Christ has risen from the dead. He offers you infinite joy. Will you surrender to him, die to yourself, so that you might enter into his inexhaustible life?