



## Revd Ro's Reflection on 18th Sunday after Trinity

### Proper 22

### Year A

**Philippians 3.4b-14**

**Matthew 21.33-46**

Paul has called himself an 'apostle to the Gentiles.' We have looked at the readings from his letter to the Romans and now have turned to Philippians. Several problems had to be faced by these first Christians as to belief. Jews were required to be circumcised on the eighth day after their birth. If you like, it was the badge of the male Jew. Then of course there were all the food laws and other requirements of the law. If these new Christians were to follow on from the first Jewish converts then surely they must adhere to all the practices strictly observed by Jews? Now we have already seen Paul denying this when he talks about 'keeping holy days' and the eating of certain foods. Paul's answer to the Jews who are insisting on this is, no it is not important. You cannot hedge these new Christians around with alien tradition. This is a new beginning – a beginning of their lives as Christians.

He begins this passage giving a catalogue of his lineage and upbringing. All very orthodox and what he took pride in, yes he is a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, more than that he has been educated as a Pharisee. As far as Jewish law, tradition and practices go he is blameless. It is right that he is proud of his Jewish background; Christianity has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. Jesus was descended from the greatest of all Jewish kings, David. But with Jesus' coming, with God's Good News, Christians have passed from the old ways. Jesus has fulfilled God's promises to the Jews. Jesus is the awaited Messiah, the Anointed One. Now all those old ways are not important. Jesus' Way and the Christian theology is the focus and is what is important. Of course his old boasts are as nothing now. It was, says Paul, zeal for that which led to his greatest of sins, persecution of Christ's followers. All those things he once viewed as 'gains' are just as nothing now. The focus now is Jesus Christ.

I think it is worth pausing here and remembering that Paul is writing this from prison, probably in Ephesus AD 52-55. In Acts 16 we have the story of Paul and his companion Silas in Philippi being arrested, punished and thrown into prison. We have the account of their miraculous night in jail and their release, Paul insisting that the magistrates release them personally as both are Roman citizens.

In the accounts we have, both here in today's reading and in Acts, the tone is upbeat. However I think we need to remember that Paul is being arrested and unfairly punished because he is proclaiming Jesus as God and Saviour. He has suffered a great deal and that takes its toll on anyone. The point I am making is that Paul is human and feels as any human would under these difficult circumstances. His whole strength, the thing that keeps him going, is his profound belief and trust in Jesus as his Saviour and Lord. He says in this passage, 'I have suffered the loss of all things.' This is not boasting it is a statement of fact. Paul only boasts in one thing Jesus Christ his Lord.

<sup>7</sup> 'Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.'

Paul's profound faith in Jesus is what sustains him in very difficult times. There is only one focus now. In other words he can survive whatever is done to him by trusting entirely in Christ, turning to him and putting himself entirely into Jesus' hands. 'Into thy hands O Lord I commend my spirit,' these words from night prayer are words of absolute trust in God and they sum up exactly what Paul is doing.

Paul knows that the former things, like obeying the law to the letter, will not win salvation. No, salvation is not a thing we can earn; it is freely given by God's grace. It was won for us by Jesus at Calvary and at his resurrection. We receive the promises of God by faith in God and Jesus as the Christ, the anointed Messiah, Jesus both God and man. That is why we must read this passage in the light of the Jesus hymn in Philippians 2.

<sup>6</sup> 'who, though he was in the form of God,'

Paul says that he is indeed suffering but <sup>10</sup> 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,' What Paul will win will be Salvation through faith in Jesus. He has tried to live Jesus' teaching in his own life and by preaching the gospel of Christ in his mission. Now he is suffering as Jesus did. Actually these things will apply to these first Christians and indeed Christians in any age. When you accept Jesus as Lord and God you do so through faith in him but that is only the first step, it requires action, 'Come and follow me.' Jesus requires us to live out his teachings in our own daily lives. If we do this we will be rewarded by the promises of God won for us in Jesus.

Paul sees the conflicts which could arise between Jews and Gentiles but he knows it must not be so. He is at pains to make it clear that there must be no artificial barriers between them, between anyone. There is no superiority in Christianity, Jew or Gentile, all who believe are equal in God's sight, 'Children of God and heirs with Christ'

At the end of the passage he makes it clear that he is working for Jesus. He uses the metaphor of the race,

'but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'

It reminds me of that old hymn, 'Run the straight race through God's good grace.' We are all running that race; I think it is a beautiful metaphor and something that we set as our pattern. Jesus is our goal; we should do our best to serve Jesus by living our lives according to his example.

The Christ poem or Jesus hymn echoes through the above reading but also through our gospel passage from Matthew.

'taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness'

<sup>8</sup> 'he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.' Philippians 2

It is important to read our gospel passage in the light of this. Jesus is fully God and fully human. He feels as a human does. We may not always see this in the gospels, but think of Jesus in Gethsemane. He is praying alone while his disciples sleep. "I am deeply grieved, even to death; ... <sup>39</sup> And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Matthew 26.

This is Jesus at his lowest ebb, knowing what was coming and reacting as any human would but God his Father is at the centre. 'Not what I want but what you want'. It is full reliance on God. Paul is doing exactly the same. He is fully focussing on Jesus as Saviour, putting God first.

So let's put this gospel story in its context. Jesus has entered Jerusalem; he has gone into the Temple and caused a stir not just with the money changers but with his teaching. The stories Jesus tells here are very thinly veiled accusations pointing the finger squarely at the Jewish powers that be. They know exactly what he means and are furious; Jesus knows what the end will be for him. Jesus is going to his death.

Here in this story of the vineyard Jesus tells the story of Israel's history. The Prophets, messengers of God's word chosen and sent by him to bring the truth to the people, are the slaves of the story. The tenants or those given authority over the people almost invariably persecute or kill them; the latest of course would be John the Baptist. Now is the great opportunity they think, here is his son; if we kill him we can get the inheritance. God is the landowner and he has sent his Son the long awaited Messiah to his people but those in charge who should be leading the people to God will not only reject his teaching and refuse to recognise him but take their opportunity and will kill him out of jealousy and fear.

It is clear enough; Jesus is in his last week of life. He knows he will be put to death in a few days, but he has the courage to confront these religious leaders as he has confronted all that is wrong throughout his life. Jesus is well and truly in command and he will be to the end.

Jesus calls himself the 'cornerstone'. The cornerstone would be the first stone set in a building and all the other stones are laid with reference to it. So it is easy to understand his reference when he quotes from Psalm 118.

<sup>22</sup> 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>23</sup> This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.'

We are familiar with the hymn 'Christ is our cornerstone on him alone we build,' which is based on this. Jesus is that cornerstone, the one that they have rejected. Reject the cornerstone of course and the building is doomed. He is the Messiah, the Christ, because of their behaviour he tells them squarely the 'First shall be last and the last shall be first.' These people who refuse to believe in Jesus will not inherit the kingdom of God. All who do so however who live in Jesus' way are equal in God's sight, loved by him and heirs of his promises.

From that minute the leaders step up their efforts to get Jesus arrested and condemned. They wait their time because the people are with Jesus in the Temple hailing him as a prophet. We know what will happen soon but Jesus challenges their behaviour knowing where it will lead. That is the way he must walk, 'and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' By following that way he will finally triumph over evil and death.

God is with us throughout our lives, I have said it before, as close as our own breathing. That is our faith. He rejoices with us in our joy and sustains us in times of sorrow or when life is hard. We will all have experienced this. When times are difficult in our lives, when we are down and things seem too much, we need to do what Paul did, what Jesus did, focus on God. Put absolute trust in God and say, 'Into thy hands O Lord, I commend my Spirit.'

*'Through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy. The praises of my God shall still my heart and tongue employ.'* Based on Psalm 34. (Tate and Brady)

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