

2. Committing to growing in faith

For some of us sat here today, next Thursday – 31st January – is an important date. It's a deadline that we know we mustn't miss. For if we miss it, there are consequences. Financial consequences. Next Thursday is the deadline for submitting your self-assessment tax return. And if you don't make the deadline, you can end up with a fine of up to a thousand pounds the longer you leave it.

So, for those of us that this affects, we will have been totting up our gains and losses for 2017-2018, our incomings against our outgoings, so that any profit can then be taxed by HM Revenue and Customs. Deep joy!

But, we're in good company, as this is precisely what Paul has been doing in our passage from Philippians 3 today, not his *tax return*, but weighing up his *life* in terms of losses and gains. And this has led Paul to draw up what has been called a 'revised balance sheet'. Like an accountant examining his spiritual stocks, Paul draws up his profit and loss account and reveals that his old status and privileges did not, in any way, add up to the joy that he now has in knowing and following Christ. In fact, all that was previously profitable to him he has decisively written off, consigning them to the rubbish dump. From the Message translation, he writes these words:

'All the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, first-hand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant – dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules, when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ - God's righteousness. I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally.'

Let's just remind ourselves for a moment who and what Paul was before that encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. He tells us himself at the start of chapter 3 that he was the perfect Jew. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. Perfect credentials, and a bright future ahead of him. By all measures that counted, Paul would have been at the very pinnacle of respect accorded to young Jewish leaders. His conversion to following Christ

therefore was not a change of direction that would have gone down well within the circles that he previously mixed, or even within his own family. They would have thought him out of his mind and would have immediately cut him off. Yet, in order to gain Christ, he willingly considers everything he previously had as 'loss', and the Greek word he uses for loss (zemia) is a word that refers to physical loss that brings consequent hardship. We see the same word used in Acts 27 to describe the loss of the contents of a ship due to shipwreck. Which is probably a good description when you consider how many times Paul was shipwrecked, beaten, run out of town, and imprisoned. And it's from prison that he's now writing his letter to the Philippians. It's in a prison cell, rejected by his Jewish countrymen, reliant on the gifts of others, with nothing to call his own, that Paul writes *'everything I had previously I now consider loss for the sake of knowing Christ.'*

'Wow, how well must he know Christ!' is what immediately goes through my mind. But then in verse 10 he says *'I want to know Christ'* and I think, *'Well, if after all that, you don't know Christ, then there's no chance for the rest of us!'* Surely, if there was ever a super-Christian, at the top of the Premiership, it has to be Paul! And he says more in verses 13 and 14:

'Brothers, 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. I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.'

Or, in other words, *'I haven't yet made it. I'm not there yet. But, I'm well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out to me.'* He doesn't regard himself as an expert, but has his eye on the goal and knows the direction in which he's running. And he's not turning back. For nothing. For no-one.

And that's all we're called to do. If Paul can say *'I don't have it all sorted yet. There's more to this knowing Jesus than I've achieved so far'*, then that has to be where we are too. But *are* we saying, *'Lord, I want to know you more. I want to grow in my faith in you. I want to do the ordinary things (in following you) better. In reading your Word. In praying. In being with, supporting and gaining support from other Christians.'*

If we're not at the point of saying 'yes', if Paul's example *hasn't* convinced us, then let's look at our gospel passage for today, from John chapter 6, right at the end.

As you'll have heard, it does not make for comfortable reading. It's not nice. If chapter 6 begins so beautifully with the feeding of the 5000, with many people following Jesus, hanging onto his every word, clamouring for just one opportunity to just get close to him, it ends so painfully. By the end of the chapter, many turn away from him. They want to follow a powerful Jesus who would make all things right, not a Jesus who wants to love us and become our friend, dwelling in us. For that's what Jesus has just been talking about in the passage before. He's teaching in the synagogue and he tells those gathered that our relationship with him, the Son, and the mutual indwelling – he lives in us and we live in him - will be similar to the relationship he has with the Father. In fact, his relationship with the Father will be the source of our relationship with him. One flows from the other. But he uses some pretty controversial words to explain what he means. He describes himself as the 'Bread of Life'. Anyone who comes to him will neither be hungry or thirsty. But he takes the food analogy a step further, a step *too far* some would argue, and says in verse 53, '*I tell you the truth. Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*' And verse 57, '*Just as the living Father has sent me and I live because of him, so also the person who eats me will live because of me.*'

We are in front of an incredible promise and gift of Jesus, a mystery that gradually unfolds, but at that point, it was completely baffling to those trying to make sense of it. We are called to become *like Jesus*, to become his *beloved friend* and so, to become beloved children of the Father. The nourishment that Jesus is talking about is his *real presence* in our hearts. He is calling us to hunger and thirst for his presence of love, his real presence. The sort of '*knowing Jesus*' that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Philippians.

But his followers listening in the synagogue do not get it at all. With all this bizarre talk of eating flesh and drinking blood they react strongly to Jesus' words and we read, '*Many among his disciples heard this and said, 'This is tough teaching, too tough to swallow.'*'

Deeply wounded in his heart because so many are turning away from him, refusing the secret of his love, Jesus, who sees the confusion of the twelve, says:

'Do you also want to leave me?'

We can almost hear the tears in his voice.

Simon Peter responds with loyalty:

'Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life.

We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

[Words that we sang in our Gloria today: *'For you have the words of eternal life, you are Jesus Christ the Lord!'*]

On Christmas Eve, what I tried to say to those who came to the Carol Service, those we know only come once a year, and to *that* service, is ... *'but, there's so much more! You come every year to hear the readings and sing carols ... but it's not moved you, convinced you, or changed you. Let this year be the year that it's different. Because there is so much more.'*

And to us, at the start of our year of discipleship, I also want to say to you, the church family ... *'there is so much more! So much more of knowing Jesus to reach. Of drawing close to him and allowing him to draw close to you.'*

The disciples knew it – eternal life that began the moment they said 'yes' to following him. And Paul knew it too. A life changed beyond all recognition. Everything he had previously, considered loss for the sake of knowing Christ. Because Paul knew, deep in his heart, that there was so much more.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,

let this year be the year that we say afresh to you, 'yes'.

'Yes, I want to know you more.

Yes, I want to love you more.

Yes, I want to grow in faith in you.'

Thank you, that on you, all our hope is founded,
and that you alone, call our hearts to be your own.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discipleship sheet and pledge card.