

*Philippians 3: 4b-14*

Am I allowed to swear in this church? You're all looking a bit puzzled. Well, here I go, whether you like it or not: σκύβαλα (*skubala*). There I've done it. I've sworn in church. In fact, I'm going to do it again - σκύβαλα.

You don't look very offended. That's probably because you're not very familiar with first-century Greek vulgarity. But St Paul was. Because that Greek swear-word I used - σκύβαλα – is the ancient Greek equivalent of our four-letter English work for a human waste-product, which rhymes with “skit”. Are you with me? Perhaps you're all too well-bred to have any idea what I'm talking about? Anyway, this is what we read in today's passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians, although our Holy Bible version translates Paul's vulgar σκύβαλα with the word “rubbish” to protect our sense of decency. So we read: “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 (σκύβαλα).”

Now I suppose if you were really determined you could use this text to justify swearing in general. If St Paul can

do it, why can't we? Well maybe; but I think that is to miss the point. Paul is much too careful with his language to use such a strong word without good reason. And the reason he swears is much the same as the reason why any of us might swear: because he feels very strongly about what he is saying. It is hard to convey your strongest feelings in writing. When I'm speaking to you, you can tell by the tone of my voice how important my speech is. But you can't so easily “turn up the volume” in a letter. So, because Paul is writing something he feels passionately about, he reaches for a strong – even shocking - word. And you can just imagine the effect it would have had on his Greek-speaking readers. If anyone had dozed off at the back of the church meeting in Philippi, they would surely have woken with a start. “He said what?!” And once all the buzz had died down about Paul's vulgarity, someone would eventually have gone back to read the text through again, to figure out what exactly it was that provoked the Apostle so much that he had to swear about it. And in a nutshell, this is what he says:

*I am the very best kind of person. I have a perfect pedigree. I am the ultimate example of what a first-century Jew should be. And I used to think that*

*mattered. I used to think that my own brilliance was what really counted. But now it means nothing to me. I regard it as nothing but σκύβαλα - rubbish (or something rather worse). And why have I changed my mind so dramatically? It is because I have discovered Jesus. Now I understand that all of my own achievements, everything I did to raise myself up, actually got in the way of my knowing that God doesn't love me, or care for me, or save me because of what I've done for myself. God loves me and cares for me and saves me because of what God has done for me, in Jesus. All the time I thought I could make myself right I was actually in the wrong. It was only when I realised that I couldn't make it on my own that God could show me the true way.*

It seems, then, that Paul was a proud man – proud of his background, proud of his achievements, proud of his status – who learnt that his pride, his sense of self-sufficiency was actually his downfall, because it meant that he couldn't see his need of God. That's how the gospel message touched him. And maybe that's how the gospel needs to touch some of us here today.

But very probably some people here have a completely different kind of need. Because some people are much

more aware of their failures than their successes. Some people feel that no matter what they do, no matter how hard they try, they never make it. For those kinds of people – and perhaps that includes some of us here – there is nothing to feel *proud* about. Instead, there are feelings of unworthiness and shame: life feels like σκύβαλα. If that is how you feel – and it is certainly how I feel sometimes – then you might just have a kind of advantage over the likes of St Paul, because you know that you don't have what it takes; you know you need help. The only question then is whether you are too proud to ask for it.

In a few moments time we will gather around the Lord's Table for Communion. And as we come forward to receive the bread and wine, we will hold out our empty hands to receive from God. And this seems as good as any illustration of everything I have been trying to say just now. And it's the most important thing to know about Christianity – so important that St Paul was prepared to swear about it, to get the point across. It doesn't matter whether you are a winner or a loser, a failure or a success. It's not what you do, or don't do, that matters: it's what God does.