

Reflection for Lent 5 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Today, the 5th Sunday of Lent, marks the start of Passiontide; and as Passiontide begins our focus moves towards the events of Holy Week. Yet before we walk once again with Christ the last week of his life, with its pain, suffering and sense of injustice, today's readings remind us of a simple yet critical part of our Christian faith & doctrine. In our own efforts and self-confidence we can get nowhere: salvation is only possible as God acts and, as he does, the seemingly impossible becomes possible; the cross being the ultimate example of God acting for us because he loves us.

It does not matter how much effort we put into finding salvation, finding the true meaning in life, finding the way back to God. It is only as God reaches out and touches our lives, only as we place our complete trust in him, that we receive the free and undeserved gift of his grace and, as we do, gain a new and clear perspective on life.

St Paul, writing to Philippians, holds before us his own life story as an example. If you could work or earn your way into the Kingdom of God by being a truly good and fervently religious person, then St Paul was just such a person. A Jew by birth, born into the tribe of Benjamin - a tribe that goes back to Rachel - his parents are Hebrew speaking Jews. In terms of the religious law, he kept it with great strictness, was trained as a Pharisee, a religious leader of the strictest sect, studying under the top teachers and scholars of his day. You could call Paul a religious fanatic.

Paul is also concerned to see that his faith is not tarnished in any way and, with the growth of what became Christianity, he feels he has to act putting every effort, not only into stopping its growth but also into attempting to stamp it out altogether. In terms of effort, zeal and hard work, Paul must get a 10 out of 10.

As he puts it himself *"a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."*

But all that changes forever on the road to Damascus. One could ask the question, how much of his encounters early Christians laid some of the ground for that encounter? But it was as Paul has that vision of Jesus that the change takes hold; God reaching out to him stops all his own efforts dead in their tracks; so much so that, years later as he looks back, he says this. *"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."*

That blinding light on the road does not so much blind Paul, rather it opens his eyes to see things from a new and infinitely better perspective.

The result is that he come to realize that to know Christ Jesus as his Lord is the one thing of ultimate worth both in this world and the next.

His old life he sees as a false basis of confidence and even a hindrance, becoming willing to give up the very things that mean so much to him - the very things he lived for - in order to follow Christ because, in doing so, he gained the richest of all gifts.

So often as individuals and a Christian community we find ourselves, maybe without thinking, being tied up with “doing” – busy, busy, busy, rather than with “being”: rather than placing our hand in God’s outstretched hand, we want to do all the work rather than allowing God to work. Before we know where we are, our faith is becoming one based more on works than on grace.

Doing is important, commitment is important, but at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian lies a living relationship with God - a God who in Christ reaches out to us as he did to Paul.

As Paul began to reflect and reevaluate his life after that Damascus Road experience, his desires, his priorities changed and he wanted to know Christ more fully. As with any friendship he longed to see it grow, and the same should be true of us.

Paul’s desire was to experience in practice what it means to both die with Christ but also to rise with him. For him, the suffering he was to endure was simply part of walking alongside Jesus - of being united with him in his sufferings.

The whole of his perspective changed from one of gaining points for himself to one of humility and trust - leading to hope and expectation. It was about God not about him.

We see a similar sort of thing in our gospel reading as *“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”* This is an act that in a prophetic way looks forward to the events about to unfold during Holy Week, but it also reflects Mary’s deep devotion to Jesus - a token of her love. With the raising of her brother, Lazarus, maybe Jesus’ words to her sister Martha now make more sense, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*

Over the next couple of weeks, as we once again walk with Jesus the way of the cross, let us reflect afresh at what God in Christ has done for us. Let us allow that reality to illuminate our lives as it did for Paul and for Mary: and let us praise God, whom to follow is not about our doing, rather about God’s. And in the light of that let us follow Paul and echo his words.

All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life.