

Reflection for Pentecost 19 – 2023 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

I wonder what types of books you enjoy on a cold damp winters evening sitting in the lounge and maybe in front of the fire. A good romantic novel, a suspense thriller or maybe a biography?

A good biography tells the story of a person's life including how that person made a real difference in the world or achieved some great feat that has not been done before. Maybe rowing across some ocean single handed, facing storms, sharks and other hazards. Or struggling against the odds in a single-minded way to achieve what seems to be impossible. We read such accounts and think, I could not achieve that!

However, if we are honest with ourselves, we all in a small way do exactly that. We set ourselves goals, we chase after things that are important to us. Sometimes we succeed in that chase other times we fail. When we do succeed there is a sense of success but sometimes when the dust has settled, and we look back, we reflect on all the effort that has gone into achieving whatever it is and ask, was it really worth it and what did that we really achieve?

Today's epistle reading reminds us of a simple yet critical part of our Christian faith & doctrine. In our own efforts we can get nowhere and achieve nothing – it is only as God acts that the impossible becomes possible (the cross being the ultimate example of this). 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 touches our lives, only as we place our trust in him, as we receive the free and undeserved gift of his grace that we gain a new and clear perspective on life.

St Paul in Philippians holds before us his own journey as an example of this. If you could work or earn your way to heaven or righteousness by being a truly good and religious person, then St Paul was the perfect candidate.

He was born into the tribe of Benjamin, and a very Jewish family. He kept every Jewish rule and law. He trained as a Pharisee (a religious leader) under some of the top teachers of his day. He was very zealous in every way. In fact, you could almost describe Paul as a *religious fanatic*.

When Christianity begins to grow, and he sees it as threat to his faith and belief, he puts all his efforts not only into stopping its growth but into stamping it out altogether.

In terms of effort, zeal and hard work – Paul must get a 10 out of 10. If you could earn points that would win you a way to God he had more than most.

Yet on the road to Damascus, he has a vision, a vision of Jesus that was to change everything. God reached out to him and stops all his efforts dead in their tracks.

So much so that, years later, as he looks back he says this. *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.”*

That blinding light on the road had not so much blinded Paul rather it opened his eyes to see things in their proper perspective. The result was that he had come to realize that to know Christ Jesus as his Lord was the one thing of ultimate worth both in this world and the next. Nothing else came close - in fact it went beyond that; he was willing to give up the very things that meant so 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 a people, as a Christian community, we find ourselves, often without thinking, being tied up with doing – busy, busy, busy! Rather than with being. Placing our hand in God's outstretched hand. Before long we find our faith is becoming one based more on works than on grace.

Doing is important, commitment is important, discipline is important. Paul himself talks about that in his letters - the idea of being an athlete training to win a race, hardening his body, increasing his stamina and strength. Yet 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 realise this, his desires, his priorities changed he wanted to know Christ more fully. As with any friendship he longed to see it grow and in a similar manner we should long for the same. 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.

There are times on my faith journey where I have encountered faith at its most profound and it has often been not in those who are busy in ministry, as profound as that may be, but in those who, because of health or other issues in their lives their faith is focused on being rather than doing.

Our Old Testament reading today is Exodus 20 - the ten commandments and they are important, but they are also rules – You shall not! When Jesus is asked to sum up the law how does he reply? Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself. This is not about doing or should I say not doing; love is about relationship. That is what Paul discovered on the Road to Damascus and it shaped him for the rest of his life. Paul's doing, our doing, should be a response to that relationship, that love, and we need to follow Paul and echo his words.

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