

Sunday Evening 28th April 2013. Kenneth Gray, Philippians 3:12-21 - 'Pressing on towards the goal'



Kenneth wondered whether passers-by who looked at our buildings would look at us and see there is more to church than the bricks and mortar, more than just an 'institution'. Would they be able to see something of God's power at work in us and in Bridge of Weir?

In verse 10 of his letter to the church at Philippi Paul states 'I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the

dead.' The church at Philippi believes that Paul already knows something of these things, even a willingness to die for his faith in Jesus Christ. But Paul makes it clear he is not perfect, and that he 'presses on'.

Unlike Paul, many of us find it easy to avoid 'pressing on'. We imagine we've come 'far enough' in our faith journey. We know 'enough' about Jesus; we're involved 'enough' in the work and witness of the church. The question for us all must be 'how far have we come in maturing our faith and how much zeal for the Lord is there still in our hearts?'

Presbyterianism emphasises that all our life situations afford us opportunities to serve the Lord - at home, at leisure and at our workplaces. We can serve God when we carry out whatever work he has called us to do - 'the Protestant work ethic' is widely recognised. And why should we grasp such opportunities? Paul states so that we 'might take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me'.

The expression 'take hold' is an interesting one. We sometimes have to 'take hold' of a reluctant child who does not wish to go somewhere such as the dentist, say. We may have to drag them along for their own good despite their protests. 'Take hold' can also mean 'embrace'. Sometimes we need to be hugged, held closely in a comforting embrace when we are downhearted or lonely.

In his service of the Lord Paul experienced both kinds of 'taking hold'. He knew times when the Lord had had to grab him and make him change direction and he also knew what it was to have the Lord walk alongside him, taking hold of him gently and tenderly. However much Paul might falter he knew the Lord's grip on him would never falter or fade. We too must seek to achieve this same assurance that only comes from a close relationship with Jesus Christ.

Kenneth noted that Egypt is full of historic monuments and buildings that no longer have any cultural or religious significance for the native population who are mostly Muslim. They appreciate their buildings for the tourism income they generate but there is no longer any spiritual or cultural connection.

It's different for us in the West. We are so fascinated by our listed buildings that any attempt to alter or remove them, say to re-route a motorway, becomes a cause célèbre. **We seem to be very interested in looking back.** It sometimes seems history teaching in our schools gets stuck in the WW2 era. Without doubt the lessons of WW2 need to be taught to each new generation so that such atrocities never recur. However, it may be that the detailed re-examination of that era might have more to do with our desire to relive what we regard as 'our finest hour' when many believe it's been 'downhill ever since'!

Nor is the Kirk exempt from this fascination with buildings. Kenneth described a meeting of a Presbytery committee where the decision to spend £3 million on church buildings had been taken in a few seconds without anyone's heart skipping a beat. This piece of business had been preceded by a speaker who had

made a presentation about people suffering hunger and homelessness - he had received a stirring round of applause, but no offer of cash.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians he believed the Second Coming was imminent. He preached with a real sense of urgency, concerned to save as many souls as possible from eternal damnation. Despite what the Bible teaches, the Church today does not really consider the Lord's return to be imminent so we are not so determined to 'press on'.

In verse 15 Paul leaves no room for argument. 'All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.' Kenneth described a small church of some 50 thousand believers living in a land surrounded by millions who hate the church. Even though small and persecuted this church is full of divisions and arguments among its people. This church was none other than the early New Testament Christian church. Nevertheless, through this small group of imperfect believers, the Lord transformed the whole world for ever. Let us therefore take heart in what God has achieved and not be discouraged.

Verses 17-21 Paul accuses the church of having its mind on earthly things when its citizenship is in heaven. Citizenship is a complicated concept but fundamentally it refers to a person's true home.

It is proper for the Kirk to serve people in the world but all humanity will ultimately share the same destiny - we will all die. Some of us age gracefully, others seem to age early because of pain or worry. But we can all look forward to the transformation of our bodies in heaven. Our heavenly citizenship should therefore be our main aspiration - the goal to which we are all pressing onwards.

Sunday Evening 14th April 2013. Kenneth Gray -Philippians 3: 1-11, "Gain and loss"

Kenneth recalled reading about a church in Northern Ireland during the Troubles where the congregation of 900 were so full of joy at worshipping together that the minister found it difficult to pronounce the benediction because the congregation didn't want to go home.

That's what worship should be like and the question for us is - do our hearts lie inside the church or outside? This is a measure of what Paul is trying to get us to understand when he says "Rejoice in the Lord... ". It's easy to get out of the habit of rejoicing.

Philippians chapter 3 has a theological and a practical message. Life can be a roller coaster of emotions but if the strength of our faith is dependent on how well or smoothly our lives are proceeding then we are not walking by faith.

Paul's reference to 'beware of those dogs' was a timely warning to the early Christian church not to stultify its worship with meaningless ritualistic observances. Their circumstances now required a new set of rules. The former Mosaic rules had had a good purpose but ritual had replaced true spirituality.

We are well advised to heed this warning too. If we don't rejoice in the Lord Jesus the Church will sink into an abyss of rule-based institutionalism. This message is still relevant today. We make rules but if we find we can't keep them then we change them and dilute them because we've lost a true relationship with the Lord.

At the end of days we are going to see a vast array of people on their knees and the sea will give up their dead and we will witness how great is the power of the Lord. Paul wants us to discover more of this power at work both in individuals and also in the Church. The Church is persecuted where God's power is being seen at work in people's lives. It is unsurprising then that the Church of Scotland is not suffering

persecution.

Paul challenges the church at Philippi to think about the qualities or background they think they need to be considered 'righteous'. Whichever 'credentials' they think are needed Paul has them all - he can tick all the boxes and display a perfect pedigree according to the outdated standards of pre-Christian law .

He states: *"If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 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 righteousness based on the law, faultless."*

But he regards all these as 'worthless rubbish' compared to knowing Jesus Christ. He exhorts them (and us) to recognise that they have been delivered from the drag of Pharisaical legalism.

Politicians frequently accuse one another of talking rubbish. It's a common put-down. Paul states - *"I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith."*

Here Paul tells us that anything that takes the place of Jesus Christ as our main priority is 'rubbish'. We can all be guilty of self-righteousness and legalism - it's very easy to condemn something then become in thrall to them ourselves. - that includes good things like family life, education, employment. Nothing compares to knowing Jesus better. No self-generated righteousness derived from ritualistic observance of the law is any kind of substitute for righteousness that flows through faith in God by his grace.

Kenneth commented that we can sometimes feel peeved when we give someone a birthday gift that we're pleased to have thought of only to discover we've been 'outdone' by a much better, more expensive or more thoughtful gift given by someone else. It's hard when we discover our effort has been second rate. We seem to spend our lives thinking we can make ourselves better. Human righteousness is second rate compared to the righteousness of Jesus. **The only righteousness worth seeking is that which comes from the one who is Holy and Perfect.**

Paul reminds us that it is not enough to just to believe in the Resurrection - we must live in the light of the Resurrection and allow its reality to change us. Our attitude should be the same as that of Jesus. We need to get rid of anything and everything that gets in the way of our relationship with Him. Making changes in our lives is hard. They say that the favourite day to start a new diet is 'tomorrow' never today. We are guilty of the same approach to changing our ways and leading more Christ-like lives.

For Paul "to live is Christ, to die is gain". How many of us are truly aspiring to this attitude? Let us not smugly compare ourselves favourably with those who do not believe in the Resurrection - rather let us all strive to allow the power of the Resurrection Truth to transform us.