



Reading: Philippians 3:4b - 14

Date: October 4, 2020

Theme: Finding ourselves found in Christ

She was an older lady, well-dressed, clearly upper class. She'd stopped to watch as I stood outside St. Patrick's Cathedral to give my word of testimony. Perhaps it was the novelty of seeing a sailor in uniform preaching on the street. Perhaps it was just curiosity.

Afterwards I talked with her. She thought that Jesus was all right for some people. Certainly, the poor and the downtrodden needed something. But she was not only religious, she was a truly good person. She had never done anything mean or petty, and while others might need Jesus, she most assuredly did not.

In the world of the University, everything revolves around qualifications and reputation, no matter your knowledge or experience, you cannot be a lecturer without a PhD, and a lecturer is only as good as the last paper or book published. All the feedback from students about how good the lecturer is gets set aside when it comes to reviews in favour of qualifications and reputation.

I was told that I wasn't a proper Christian. I hadn't been baptised by full immersion, I didn't believe in predestination and I questioned scripture. I wasn't a Christian just because I believed in Jesus the Christ; there was more to it than that.

Three little stories that all converge on this passage from the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Well, we might call it the third chapter, as it's one continuous letter, it would be more accurate to call it the middle of the letter. The third point in his presentation to the Philippians of what it means to give all in the service of God's love in the Gospel of Jesus. Whatever happens in your life, rejoice because God is with you and the Gospel is being proclaimed. Imitate the example of Jesus who gave all his life in the service of the Gospel. And here, as a third point, is Paul's personal confession of how much he has sacrificed, not because he thinks sacrifice and suffering are important, but because knowing Jesus Christ and following the call of the Gospel is so much more valuable, real, and important compared to any of what he previously aspired to.

Some of you will be familiar with what is called the Jerusalem Council; described in Acts 15, and, from a different point of view, in Paul's letter to the Galatians. The relationship between Jews who had come to believe in Jesus and Gentiles who had heard the Gospel was a live issue in the early church. Should Gentiles be made to follow the Laws of Moses in order to be considered proper Christians? After all Jesus is the Messiah according to Jewish scripture and tradition. Paul soundly rejected that notion, and the Jerusalem Council came to agree with him. Not just because God had affirmed Gentile faith through the giving of the Spirit, but because Paul came to see that qualifications and legal obedience and seeking after self-righteousness was a human constructed, human centred religious exercise. God, in Christ has reconciled us and we don't need to construct or strive

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after our own reconciliation. Indeed, all of that striving and achievement - either through pursuing knowledge and understanding, or through religious practice and piety, or through physical rigour and discipline - is a waste of time compared with faith in Jesus as the Christ. But for some, that was just Paul's opinion, God had given the Law and inspired the traditions and they were just as fervent as Paul in demanding that all Christians should follow the Law of Moses. And it is highly likely that they followed Paul to all his new churches and preached this message, "Be circumcised, follow the food laws, obey the Sabbath and all the festivals, and so on." And Paul's advice to the Philippians? Not just to insult them and ridicule them but to say simply, "I used to be one of them and I gave it all up because Christ Jesus is so much more valuable."

Here is Paul, abandoned by his previous friends and family in Antioch and Jerusalem, separated from his nation and race, disconnected from his traditions and, on top of all that, in jail for his new beliefs, and what does he say? All the previous things I thought important are like rubbish to me now, I have been found by Jesus Christ. Like Jesus parables of the pearl and the treasure in the field, but from Paul's point of view, he didn't find the pearl or the treasure, the treasure found him! He didn't sell all he had to win Jesus, he willingly gave it all up as a pointless exercise. It's no wonder that Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, acknowledges that his preaching was foolishness to the Greeks. Where was the deep philosophy, the detailed theology, the requirements of practice and worship? All rubbish, in order to know Christ and be found in Him.

Theological demands, adherence to creeds and doctrines, purity of worship, symbols and practices. All of that is good if it follows simple faith and brings us closer to God and Christ but don't put the cart before the horse. Finding ourselves found in Christ is not a matter of theological correctness, or a reward at the end of set of religious practices, it is the simple faith that we are called to. A faith that is so valuable that you would willingly give up all that searching and religious achievement and personal progress. Are you further from God because you aren't in church and following all the traditions and practices and behaviours that you thought were the correct way to God?

Don't listen to people who try to tell you that you have to do something, believe something or follow something to be a 'proper' Christian. You know, in your heart that Jesus is Christ and you have been found in Him.

Don't think that because you do something, believe something, or follow something that you are a Christian. Seek to find yourself found in the love of God in Jesus the Christ, the faith that is of surpassing value.

All our religious and moral achievements are as nothing compared to the knowledge of Jesus as the Christ. And giving up those things, and all the connections, respect or reputation that they brought, is not a sacrifice, because we have the greater treasure of being found in Christ and living the new life of the people of God. A life lived with the God of all life. Amen

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