

TONIGHT - 7.30pm in the Breakspear Room - how are you getting on with Philippians?

Philippians Chapter 3

Overview

One of the recurring battles that Paul had to fight was with Jewish Christians who believed that Gentiles (non-Jews) could only really become Christians if they *first* became Jews. It was not a question of rejecting Gentiles – simply the insistence that their welcome into God’s people required of them what belonging to that people had always required: circumcision and keeping the Law. Paul, who once took great pride in fulfilling such criteria with style – his credentials in terms of ancestry, upbringing, training and zeal were such that none could question *his* membership in God’s people – responds fiercely. The *only* thing that matters now is a person’s knowledge of Jesus Christ: *everything* else, however venerable, must be counted as a distraction or even an obstacle to that knowledge. It is relationship to Jesus which unleashes within us the kind of transformative power Paul spoke of in Chapter 2, and which now drives us towards our destiny: sharing in the glory of the resurrection.

But it would be misleading to think of this destiny in terms of ‘going to Heaven’ as a place in the sky after we die. When Paul says that we are citizens of Heaven, and we await our Saviour’s coming from there, he is speaking in terms very familiar to the Roman colonists of Philippi ... their job is precisely *not* to return to Rome, but to embody Roman civilisation and implement Roman rule in Northern Greece. Similarly, the Christian’s task is not to escape from this world to Heaven, but to participate in Christ’s work to transform this world ... while waiting for Him to arrive, like the Emperor, to complete that work in person. That transformation will be so comprehensive and radical as to involve even our own fragile, mortal bodies ... *we* will be filled with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

Things to think about

3:8 ‘the surpassing knowledge of *knowing* Christ Jesus my Lord’ – *knowing* is always a loaded word in the Bible. It means much more than simply having information about someone, or even being acquainted with someone. Right from Genesis 4:1, where Adam

'knew' his wife Eve and she bore a son, 'knowing' denotes not only sexual union but – obviously connected to that – union at the deepest, personal, spiritual level. To know Christ is for one's life to be fused with his, in a way analogous to the kind of fusion that happens in sexual love (see Ephesians 5:25ff, among other places, for Paul spelling this out explicitly). We can see the clear continuity in theme from Philippians 2: this letter is all about having the life of Christ coursing within us. It is not just, as we so often reduce it to, a matter of seeking to follow Christ's example or values, laudable as that might be – Christianity is more mysterious than mere ethics.

3:10 worth a lifetime in meditation all by itself: to know Christ in the sense outlined above is simultaneously to share in his sufferings and to become like him in his death, and to share in his resurrection. In other words, we must experience within ourselves the putting to death of everything selfish (to the point, perhaps, of surrendering our lives themselves), and as we do so we will also experience the inner moral and spiritual renewal which is the harbinger of the coming renewal of the whole world. As we cease to be driven by our own ego, we come to be driven by the life of Christ which ends in resurrection joy. Look carefully at our baptism service – this is what all its symbolism of death and rebirth is about!

Things to pray about

3:4-7 – Paul had to set aside a very impressive set of credentials because they got in the way of that relentless, all-absorbing knowledge of Jesus. Ask God to show you what might be getting in your way? What might be more fundamental to your identity and sense of self-worth than your belonging to Jesus?

Some would say this chapter feeds into a sad and dark history of relations between Christians and Jews. Pray that the astonishing transformation in those relations since the Holocaust may deepen and endure.