**Forgetting what is behind and Straining to what is ahead**

*Philippians 3:4b-14, Bishop’s Sermon, 4.10.20*

Hello everyone, and welcome to the Bishop’s Sermon on this, the 17th Sunday after Trinity. Today we have some wonderful readings in the Lectionary, including the 10 commandments in Exodus chapter 20 and the parable of the tenants in Matthew chapter 21. But I’d like to focus instead on our epistle reading from Philippians 3:4-14, which is truly the Apostle Paul at his most inspiring: and our theme, taken from that reading, is this: *‘forgetting what is behind, and straining to what is ahead’.*

Prayer.

It was one of the most heart-stopping moments of the Rio Olympics: nine laps into the 10,000 metre final, and Mo Farah was accidentally tripped by a team mate and fell. To be tripped in quite such a competitive environment would have wrecked the chances of a lesser athlete, but not Mo Farah. "I wasn't going to let it go," he later reflected. "I got up quickly. I thought about my family. It made me emotional. I thought 'get through, get through'. I believed in myself." And Mo duly recovered to surge past Kenyan Paul Tanui on his way to another Olympic Gold.

*‘One thing I do’,* wrote St. Paul: *‘Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus’.*

Of course Paul himself had tripped up badly: he had a lot of forgetting to do. For Paul, or Saul as he was then known, had been at least partially responsible for the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and had behaved like a raging bull from then on in, ‘breathing murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples’, as Luke puts it, and seeking the authority to arrest and imprison followers of ‘The Way’. Just as 1000 years before, his *Old* Testament namesake *King* Saul had chased young David around the desert, seeking desperately to catch and kill him, so this new Saul was just as ruthless as his predecessor in his attempt to wipe out the movement inspired by David’s Greater Son. In a letter to young Timothy he was later to describe himself as a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man, indeed as the very ‘worst of sinners’.

And here was the most challenging thing of all: that all along Saul, Paul, had *thought* he was doing the right thing. In the first verse of today’s reading, he’d talked about his religious credentials as a younger man, the impressive CV that had accompanied him when he applied to study at the school of Gamaliel: how he’d been circumcised on the eighth day, had been born into the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, and an unusually zealous one at that - someone who’d kept the Law to the letter: truly a man to watch, one of the brightest and best of all the up-and-coming rabbis. And yet the Law of God – or at least his false *interpretation* of the Law of God – was precisely what had driven him in his murderous campaign to wipe out both the Messiah of God and some of the People of God. Just as Jesus had prophesied a little while before – a prophecy that still has haunting resonance in the world of Islamic State and Boko Haram:

*‘An hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so, they are offering worship to God’.*

Indeed, that would be Jesus’ own experience, as reflected in our gospel reading today, where the unscrupulous tenants in Jesus’ parable resorted to killing the owner’s beloved Son.

So when Paul was tripped up by the presence of the Risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus; when that Risen Jesus spoke words that echoed young David’s appeal to *King* Saul’s better nature a thousand years’ before: ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’; Paul’s ensuing blindness was symbolic of everything he’d previously stood for. Every entry on his spiritual CV that had previously given him confidence and pride now brought him only guilt and shame. All that credit that he’d thought he’d built up in his heavenly bank account, had now been shifted to the debit column, showing him mightily in debt, a blasphemer, a violent man, the worst of sinners. ‘Whatever were gains to me’, as he put it, ‘I now consider loss’. And yet: something new had mysteriously appeared in the credit column, an entry that wiped out his debts in one fell swoop: what Paul here describes as the ‘righteousness that comes through faith’ in Christ, and not through slavish obedience to the Law. It was a full seventeen hundred years’ later that former slave trader John Newton would write of the

*‘Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,*

*That saved a wretch like me’.*

But had that song been around in Paul’s day there’s no question that he would have sung it from the very depths of his being.

So what now? Prior to his encounter on the Road to Damascus, Paul’s ambitions had been clear: to obey the Law of Moses as best he knew how; to rise to prominence in the respectable world of the Pharisees; and to wipe out the early Church. Following his encounter on the Road to Damascus, it was rather less obvious – not least because of the tricky business of persuading Peter, John and the other apostles that he was for real and not a phony: that he really had had a Road to Damascus experience.

Had he been at fault in the way he’d behaved: that was one of the questions he wrestled with. From one perspective he had, but from another he’d simply been acting out of ignorance. Perhaps it didn’t really matter, now that he’d been so deeply humbled, and Christ had so clearly called him into his service. And so gradually, two new ambitions began to grow within him, which couldn’t have been a greater contrast than the old ones. The first related to his calling: that through the extraordinary irony of God, his sense of humour if you like, this ‘Hebrews of Hebrews’, this ‘Pharisee of Pharisees’ was called to the first apostle to the *Gentiles*; while the second related to the quality and depth of his Christian discipleship:

*‘I want to know Christ’, he wrote, ‘and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead’.*

In the previous chapter of Philippians, Paul had written of how Christ Jesus, though in very nature God, had made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant and humbling himself even to death on the cross. And in a very real way Paul himself was now being called to follow in Christ’s footsteps, leaving behind his respectability as an up-and-coming rabbi, and embracing a way of life in which he’d increasingly be treated as a criminal by the Roman and Jewish authorities alike, and would eventually be executed like his Master – though appropriately, as the Apostle to the *Gentiles*, executed in Rome, the Gentile capital, not Jerusalem, the Jewish one.

That was for later; but for now, Paul was picking himself up from the ground and running once more:

*‘One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus’.*

At that moment he had Mo Farah’s determination, there’s no question about that, but his motivation was somewhat different. For while Mo’s secret, in his own words, was that ‘I believed in myself’, Paul’s secret was rather that ‘I stopped believing in myself, and started believing in the One who had called me’. And believe and run he did, straining towards what was ahead until, towards the very end of his life, he was able to write to Timothy again,

*‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing’.*

And so to us, still in the midst of this Covid crisis, which has so humbled humanity, and all too aware of our own failings and frailties, not least when we reflect on the somewhat tepid nature of our faith in Christ when compared with the mighty Paul of Philippians chapter 3.

We may share with Paul, though, some sense of regret as we look back over our lives thus far – some sense that we’ve tripped up, or have taken a wrong turn along the way. That may be true of the church where we worship too. And here’s where the prescription that Paul wrote for himself, as he struggled to let go of that mental image of Stephen being stoned to death, is quite so powerful:

 *‘One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus’.*

So what should be our ambitions as we strain towards what is ahead, especially in this time of such profound change? I guess they should relate to the ambitions of Paul as to his calling and the quality and depth of his Christian discipleship.

This ‘apostle to the Gentiles’, as he became known, recognized that there were huge swathes of the population of his day who knew nothing about the God of Abraha,, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – and that his calling was to do all that he could to change that, becoming a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to Gentiles, so that by all possible means he might draw people to Christ. That too is our calling, right across the diocese, working and praying together with the other churches around us, as we too face huge swathes of the population whose knowledge and understanding of the Christian gospel could be written on the back of a postage stamp: to the traditionalists being traditionalist, to the contemporaries being contemporary, to the digital generation going digital, so that many might respond to the transforming news of a God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

And to do that we need to commit ourselves to Paul’s second ambition: his extraordinary willingness to give his all to the One who had cancelled his debt, who had tripped him up on the Road to Damascus only to set him on his feet again, but this time as a messenger of Good News not Bad News. Church life can so easily become inward-looking and petty, but to be frank we don’t have the luxury of that now, if our churches are to have a hope and a future. Instead we need the spirit of a Paul, with his impressive willingness to put away his small ambitions and focus on something far bigger, far more compelling:

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

Amen.