

Lent 2 - 17 March

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Psalm 27

Join in imitating me... That is quite something to say. We don't do that anymore, do we? Yes, when you are teaching a child to play football, or to brush her teeth, then you are allowed to say 'Just do as I do, and you will get the hang of it.' I myself have occasionally given dancing lessons. In that case people were more than happy to imitate me. They knew it was the only way for them to get anywhere at all. But that's as far as it goes. If I would say to you, speaking from the pulpit like today: Just join in imitating me, and you will be good Christians, it would probably make you feel irritated. Well, honestly, I **hope** it would make you feel irritated! We don't feel comfortable with this kind of authority anymore. If it's about life style and life choices, about what to believe or not to believe, our time is all about authenticity. We are called to follow our own hearts. To be our unique selves. To do only what feels right to us personally. So here is a problem: imitating another person, even if it is somebody we respect, goes against the grain with us.

We need to look at the context to do justice to what Paul is saying. He doesn't say this out of the blue – it's the end of chapter 3 after all!

Before setting himself as an example, Paul has written much about the example of Christ. He has pointed out, in chapter 2, how Christ has given up everything for our sakes. It is one of the oldest Christ hymns in the New Testament: 'Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.'

Paul is fascinated by this Christ. He never tires of thinking about this mystery. It is the one message he wants to talk about: Christ becoming the slave of all, born in human likeness, identifying himself with us, completely immersing himself in human existence to heal it and to make it holy. He wants to know this Christ, to learn from him and about him. Even if it means that he has to give up things that used to be important to him. That used to be his whole identity, even. That is what he is talking about in chapter 3. He paints himself as the pious, true Jew that he was in every respect: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

This was Paul's glory. This was his religious identity. There was no Paul without all this. And still, somehow, meeting Christ made it all seem unimportant. It became a burden even, a stumbling block, something that shut him out from real life, from God himself. It was like being dead. Being locked up in his own uprightness and convictions, so convinced of his own ways that he was willing to kill for them.

Meeting Christ has set him free from all this. The new life he has found surpasses all he ever knew before. Everything that used to be important to him is nothing compared to this. He wants to get rid of it as much as possible. Like Christ himself, as described in chapter 2, he wants to empty himself. He wants the same mind that was in Christ Jesus to be in him too. Knowing Christ, having the life of God inside you – the life of God who is the source of all life – the life that is stronger than destruction and death – this life is everything.

This helps us to understand why he is so upset about those who live as enemies of the cross. It is important to bear in mind that these people are church members. But they live in a way that is contrary to the example of Christ, to the values of God's kingdom. They live 'contrary to their profession', as the collect of today has it. Instead of emptying themselves, they stuff themselves – this does not just refer

to their eating habits, but to a spiritual attitude of being puffed up and full of self-importance. This will never do, says Paul. Calling yourself a Christian and not showing his life, not living according to his spirit – it is a form of hypocrisy that will turn against you in the end.

No, let us be transparent instead. Let us live in such a way that people will recognize God in us. In chapter 2 Paul has encouraged the Philippians to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, to regard others as better than themselves, to look to the interest of others and not only to their own.

This is the example he wants to give us. Not because he is already there, and getting everything right, and we are not. He says so explicitly in verse 12: not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Neither does he mean that we should copy him, or agree with all his views on practical and ethical matters. But whatever we see in him of Jesus, and of the life of the kingdom of God, that we are encouraged to imitate. And of course, we do not have to restrict ourselves to Paul's example only! We should look around and keep our eyes wide open to find as many examples as possible.

Anything that reminds us of who Christ is and who God is - that should inspire us to live our own lives as Christians.

Wherever we see selfless giving love – let it inspire us to do likewise.

Wherever we see people working for justice and reconciliation – let it inspire us to follow their example in our own context.

Wherever we see people caring for each other, helping each other, going to great trouble to give somebody else a better life – let it inspire us to do so too.

Wherever we see people taking care of God's creation, loving what he has made – let it inspire us to live as good stewards.

Wherever we see any sign of the kingdom life, any sign of God's Holy Spirit at work – that's where we should pay attention. We should make it our goal to be such people ourselves – people who reflect Christ in their lives. It may be that some of our own cherished beliefs or customs or habits will have to go to make that possible. It is something to think about, especially in this season of Lent: Is there anything that is holding us back? What might be a stumbling block for me, for you, for us all as a church?

Let us pray that we may see Christ in all the glory of his humility and self-giving love, whenever he makes himself visible to us in others. Let us pray that we like Paul will be able to say: whatever is a stumbling block to us to reflect this Christ ourselves, let us just get rid of it. We long to live his life, we long to be free to follow him, we long to show that glorious abundance of the kingdom of God, in which all things will share in the end. And if our hearts are filled with him like that, then, by all means, let us follow our own hearts.

Amen.