

Having our priorities straight

Philippians 3.4-14

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I remember in the past, often singing the popular song:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in his wonderful face
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim
in the light of his glory and grace.

That seems the sort of song you have to sing with eyes closed, as it is about the things of earth becoming strangely dim.

St Paul wrote, in the passage that we have read from his letter to the church in Philippi:

I regard everything as loss, because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Beautiful words of the apostle Paul. Is he so religious that he only thinks of heaven, and that the things of earth have grown strangely dim for him?

Did the knowledge of Jesus Christ stop any interest in the things of this world, or did it make our world less valuable for him?

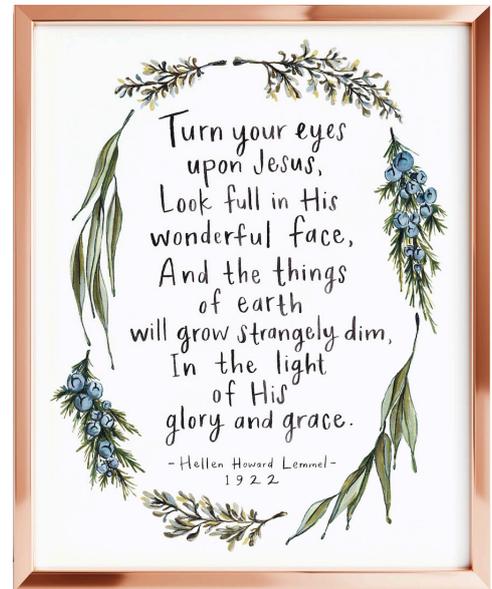
1. The surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ

Let us approach this question by first looking at what it means to speak of knowing Jesus Christ. I think we should think of four aspects.

First, knowing Jesus means we know Him as presented in the Holy Scriptures and as described in our theology. We deal with the facts. We can describe his life, death and resurrection, we know He is now seated at the right hand of God, and we expect Him to make this world right one day.

Knowing Him can also be described in terms of the impact He has on us personally. He is the one who forgives, He has made your life right with God. He cares for you.

And then, there is this more mysterious aspect: we also know Him by participating in his suffering. Paul is in prison and suffers with Christ. This participation in what happened to Jesus of course makes us know Him better; shared experiences give us some sort of insider knowledge.





And there is another mysterious personal aspect. We meet with Him in worship, in Holy Eucharist, when we commune with Him in prayer.

In those moment we actually experience a deepening of the knowledge we have - because He is there with us to blow life into our factual knowledge.

The presence of the Spirit of God in your life makes it possible to know Jesus beyond dogma, in the intimacy of your life. This does not make dogma - the content of our faith - less important, but dogma is to point us to the reality of our communion with God through Jesus Christ.

Because of this knowledge of Jesus Christ, Paul writes: I do not trust in the flesh.

Paul had a great background to be proud of; he had every reason to trust in himself. He sums up where he came from:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

You notice, that Paul's pride in 'the flesh' was not only about his physical background, but also about his mental life, his spirituality, his zeal, his righteousness. All that he sums up with the word 'flesh.'

Paul did not make a negative statement about physical life - but about all he ever considered as his great accomplishments.

Paul did very well as a Jew; he was satisfied with himself as a serious follower of the laws of Moses. He was zealous, blameless. 'Look at me, good boy. God can be so pleased with me.'

2. Count all as loss

But then Paul met with Jesus Christ on the Road to Damascus. And Paul realised, by meeting with Jesus Christ and through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, that he had to review his whole system of thought.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

He came to the conclusion, during a long desert retreat, that compared to knowing Jesus Christ, all things to be proud of and to trust in were really not that impressive. and really held him away from God.

Meeting with Jesus did not make things dim, but in the light of Christ, Paul saw the truth. He saw all things more clearly.

From many other parts of Paul's writings we know he was proud of his Jewish background and his previous lifestyle.

But compared to knowing Christ, it meant nothing. We must not read an absolute rejection in the words of Paul, but a comparison. "Nothing is as valuable as knowing my Lord Jesus Christ."

Because nothing can help us towards God, and if we think our own background or efforts help us toward God, Christ can do us no good.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ, giving a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

We do not have to reject who we are; we do not have to reject our cultural background; we do not have to look down upon the countries we are from. We can be proud of all this.

Actually, the knowledge of Christ gives true value to all things. He is the Lord of all nations; He gave humankind its desire to develop culture; He gave us the abilities to develop this world. This should not make us despise our world, our own heritage, our daily life. It gives it extra value, because now we understand that God participates in all things.

In the light of Jesus Christ we truly appreciate our life, our world, our culture. In his light, the things of earth become not dim, but we seem them sharper.

Through Christ we have come to appreciate all of life as an expression of Gods creative love for us.

Surely, if we have all things in life, if we have money, a good house, a fine job, that is great. But it does not make us right with God. And if we are not right with God, our money, our house, our job may not give us much joy at all.

If we reject all things that we possess, all things we studied, our best accomplishments, as roads to happiness and salvation, and we gain our Lord Christ, they we receive all things back from him. God makes us enjoy all things - because He is involved in it.

Art, music, beauty, goodness, friendships, health, they are all gifts form God. We must not despise the reality we live in; we do not look down on our daily normal life. We must rather baptise it with the presence of our Lord; then they become gifts of God in our hand.



Our life is like a house cluttered with furniture. If we think that all that stuff makes us happy, we are mistaken. But if the Lord enters into our house, and sets the furniture in the right place, we begin to truly enjoy it all.

And He will also throw a bit of furniture out and bring some new in, because in his light we also see some of the dark shadowy areas in our life.

And if the Lord is in the house of your life, in his temple, with the furniture of our heritage, our nationality, our family, our experiences in life more or less in the right place, we can then start the process of knowing the Lord better.

Paul wanted to know Him and his life-changing power. I desire that as well.

3. 'Christ Jesus has made me his own'

But Paul also speaks of sharing in the sufferings of Christ; he wrote this letter from prison, so he did actually suffer with Jesus Christ. I like this less, I admit. But with Jesus in the house, we can suffer the storms.

For Paul, this sharing in the sufferings of Christ was really part of his discipleship. In the letter to the Philippians, a chapter before what we just read, he described how Jesus did not consider his heavenly life to be so important that He did not want to become human with us.

He gave up all things. He emptied himself of all he possessed. As we are to follow Christ and give up all things for his sake. To receive them all back from God as Jesus gained the heavens and the earth by his emptying himself.

Paul expresses his hope that as he suffered with Christ, he would therefore also share in his resurrection, but he wrote also that he had not reached that goal yet.

He hoped for it. "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own."

Is Paul not sure of his salvation? I think this is not the issue in what he writes.

He knows he is not perfect yet. Perfection cannot be found in this life, but only hereafter when God gives us our complete overhaul.



The presence of Jesus Christ in his life makes Paul see himself in a new light. As a law-abiding Pharisee, he was very sure of himself - he knew he did all God wanted from him. He thought he would walk straight into the new kingdom.

Now, with Jesus in his life, he has a new set of standards. Jesus Christ, the Son of God is the perfect standard. We will in our life never reach his perfection.

So things on earth did not get dim for Paul, and he did not see himself in a soft light. He saw himself and the world in the floodlight of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus was on board of his life.

And this was the very reason why he did not doubt his eternal salvation either. He knew he was safely in the hands of his Lord.

This striving that Paul describes is not to attain eternal salvation - he says in verse 14 that he presses on "because Christ Jesus has made me his own." Past perfect tense. Done.

Owned by Christ - that is the most secure place in the world.

You are - at this very moment - owned by Christ. You are safe in his hands. It is the very security of this relationship that makes us desire to live for Him, to know Him, to know Him more and to always strive for better.

Conclusion

Paul uses the language of pressing on, striving, doing our best, straining forward. This is not language for people who are lazy or people who are content with their present life.

St Augustine said in one of his sermons:

Examine yourself. You should always be unhappy with what you are, if you want to attain what you are not yet. [...] Always grow, always walk on, always advance; do not stop on the way, do not turn back, do not go off course. [...] It is better to hobble along the road than run on any other route. ("Sermon" 169, 15, 18)

Worry not if you just hobble on. We are all rather lame when it comes to following our Lord. But let us hobble on, let us at least move forward.

In his light we can be brutally honest about our imperfection; we can do this because we know we are owned by Him, safe in his hands.

We see all things sharper. We see the whole world and ourselves in his light.

Therefore we want to know Jesus Christ more. And this demands our full attention, our focus, our hard work.

Not in order to gain brownie points with God. We are already owned by Him. Hidden in the hollow of his hands. But we desire to know him more, better, deeper.

Amen.