4th October 2020

**Call to worship**

God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit –
calls us to set our sights on the goal
of following and living in the way of Christ.
God calls to us follow now.



**HYMN At the name of Jesus**



**A prayer of approach**

Lord God,
as we journey towards the goal you set before us,
we see glimpses of who you are,
often too deep and unimaginable
to grasp fully the depth of your being.
What we see and feel spurs us on
in our journey to discover more of you.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession**

God of the journey of life,
the mystery of our very being,
we confess that the journey we take
gets disrupted and we get sidetracked.
We go off on wild goose chases that lead us nowhere,
up blind alleys and into bad and barren places.
We find our way back to you in sorrow for our failings
and in penitence for our wanderings.
May we be enriched by your welcome,
relieved by your forgiveness
and comforted by your all-embracing love.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord God, we are all so different, each our own being;
and yet you love and care for us all,
you nurture and protect us.
How can we not be thankful to you
for all that the journey with you offers!
We thank you that you guide us,
in unexpected ways, to find the right way in life.
We thank you that when we wander, you draw us back to you,
give us new direction and encourage us to follow where you lead.
We thank you that you know our individual needs and quirks,
and yearn for us to be on the journey of life with you.
We thank you that the pains of life can be overshadowed
by the joy of walking with you.
For all these blessings and more,
we give you thanks and praise.
**Amen.**



**Philippians 3.1-14**

Some people are overconfident verging on arrogant. George Bernard Shaw said, ‘My speciality is being right when other people are wrong’. Taken to the extreme, over confidence can verge of blasphemy: King Alonso 10th of Spain in 13th century said ‘Had I been present at the creation, I would have given some useful hints for the better ordering of the universe’.

On the other hand, there are those who feel totally worthless. They are inwardly afraid, suffering from a sense of inadequacy and insecurity. Often those whom we would expect to be confident are in fact lacking in confidence. It is estimated at least 80% of teenagers do not like the way they look, a feeling amplified by constant comparison on social media.

Julia Roberts the film star said ‘my mouth is too big, and my smile is too gummy. Only my wardrobe people know how paranoid I am about my body.

Madonna has said: all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. I am always struggling with that fear.

The late Michael Jackson described himself as the world’s loneliest man’ saying that as an adult, he still felt just as he did at school when ‘there was one girl I like but I wasn’t able to tell her. I was too embarrassed.’

I was the first member of my family to ever go to University. When I arrived at Nottingham University in the mid-1980s I was met by middle class students from professional homes who ridiculed my Lancastrian accent and humble working class terraced house Coronation Street background. It could have undermined my confidence and education and at times it did hurt but it made me push deeper into my faith in Christ as the grounds for my confidence.

Paul as we know is writing this letter from prison where he has been arrested and tortured and awaiting trial and possible execution. Yet his letter to the Philippians is full of joy. His joy in Christ and his confidence through Christ for the future.

This letter is challenging and encouraging reading for us in a time of pandemic when maybe our confidence is low, when things we took for granted are no longer, when jobs are uncertain and outlooks shaky. How can we still hold on to joy and confidence in Christ?

In this chapter 3 Paul uses a few choice words which have been politely translated into English. In verse 2 he warns the church in Philippi to watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. That’s not nice describing people as dogs is it? He is referring to a group who has infiltrated the church and are insisting that the new Christians should be circumcised, forcing a Jewish rite on Gentile Christians in order to make them ‘real’ Christians and arguing that faith in Jesus is not enough to be confident before God.

Paul calls his opposition ‘dogs’. Strong stuff denouncing your enemies as dogs! I really would like to see Paul go head to head with Donald Trump.

Paul says there is nothing we can add to what Jesus achieved for us on the cross and that on the cross he showed how much God loves us – loved us even to death – so we can have confidence that God forgives and accepts us if we have faith to believe that and see it.

Paul then goes on to say that if someone thinks they have confidence in the flesh he has more. He had been circumcised. He had national privilege being a Jew, who regarded themselves as the Chosen People, he had family background from the tribe of Benjamin - this tribe gave Israel their first king. He had racial purity he was a Hebrew of Hebrew. He had confidence from his personal achievements. He had been religious. He was a Pharisee, scrupulous in keeping the laws and rules. He had never been in trouble. His life was without blemish: pure!

He was utterly sincere in his beliefs and energetic in carrying them out. Sincerity of belief is not enough though. You can be sincerely wrong. Paul had been persecuting the Christian church.

Finally, he had led a good life. he regarded himself as without fault. I wish I had a pound for every time I have sat with grieving relatives who had told me the deceased was a good person. They never did anything wrong. They would give their last penny to anyone who asked.

Today there are many who have great problems with the idea that they are sinful and that they need forgiveness. They feel they have led a good life and never done anything wrong.

Paul must have been a bit of an accountant because he seems to run his eye down this list and adds up all the things which gave him confidence before. He sued to regard them as ‘profit’ or ‘gains’. Now as he does his sums, the bottom line is a heavy ‘loss’. he rejects all those things with disgust. He describes them as ‘garbage’ in verse 8. This is the other word that has been politely translated into English when the actual Greek word means human excrement. Four letters – You know what I mean.

Paul is claiming that none of the achievements of the secular world can bring true confidence, no matter what we achieve in terms of career, success, academic achievement, fame, money, background, ethnicity, religiosity.

All the things which brought him confidence before he was Christian, he now regards as useless, putting it politely, when contrasted with something which is immeasurably greater. Now he has totally new confidence.

*I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ****9****and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*

One day Paul encountered Jesus and from that day onwards he lived a vital, lively, continuing relationship with Christ. His confidence rested on his standing before God. He was right before God because of what Jesus had done on the cross. God showed how much he loved us because Jesus was willing to die for us. Forgiving us as he did so. We have that acceptance before God that not even death can destroy. We cannot earn it. We can never be good enough for it, conversely no matter how bad we have been we are still loved and offered forgiveness and a new start. That is what the cross declares to us. That is our confidence in life.

When I graduated from university in the mid to late 1980s, I was unemployed, one of three and half million unemployed in the country at that time. There was a lot of despair and despondency around and it may be that we are heading that way again, as we see job losses everywhere due to the pandemic. It is hard not to feel useless and of little value when you don’t have a job. It was a hard time for me, wondering what the point of all that education was to be discarded on the scrap heap. You have to dig deep at times like that to find where your sense of wroth lies. What you put your confidence in.

It wasn’t easy for me at the time – I’ll be honest. Having your confidence knocked is hard and crushing. Looking back the things that helped me get through was the support of friends, those who still valued my company and was sensitive to my circumstances, often giving me the odd treat. There was my church where I was always welcomed and affirmed. There was my faith that told me despite my circumstances and knock backs I was still special and of value to God. When you are stripped back where does your ultimate confidence lie?

Modern society is in a real dilemma about identity. Identity politics is a topical matter. Who are we? What is the basis of our self-esteem? Simplistically speaking there are three different groups of people.

Traditional people look to their duty and role in community to find their sense of self. What class are you, what job do you do? What achievements have you made? Which tribe do you identify with?

Then there are those who look inward. They don’t believe in any cosmic order, but they rely on competition and shifting fashions to create themselves, to be who they want to be. They are no freer than members of traditional society for they must take their happiness and even their selves at the whims and fashion of the day.

But there is a third option – there are people who look neither outward nor inward but upward. What if we are created by a personal God and given a personal mission and calling? Then neither does the individual take precedence over the group (which can lead to social fragmentation) nor does the community take precedence over the individual (which can lead to oppression and conformity). What matters is not what society says about me, nor what I think of myself, but what God does.

Our modern identity can be crushing. Many years ago if you grew up in Dursley you would work for Listers. If you grew up in Burnley, my hometown -you would work down the mill. On one level life was simple and straight forward. Now young people are led to believe they can be whoever they want to be. Which in once sense is freeing but in another sense a burden and possibly leads to disappointment and even despair when dreams do not become reality. If those things of success or achievement or some human love relationship is jeopardized, then you lose your identity. The traditional self could be suffocating, captive to what your family or community told you you must do. Adding some religious or moral structure often only aggravated the problem. They are all conditioned on what others think and say of you.

Paul is arguing our confidence comes not on the desires of either the individual or the community but on God. God is the ultimate source of our recognition. If you look to your parents, they could disappoint you or even reject you. The same is true of your love partner or any human being. If on the other hand you look for acclaim through work or accomplishments, you are vulnerable to your own failure or the failure of others to rightly value your work.

Paul claims that the surest source of your identity and confidence is knowing Christ – knowing that God loves you through Jesus Christ. And developing that relationship.

Often, we hear people name dropping. They are so proud that they know someone rich and famous or titled: it bolsters their confidence. Paul says that is nothing compared to knowing the king of Kings and Lord of Lords, the name above all names, and knowing him in an intimate way day by day.

His desire is to know the power of Christ’s resurrection: It is a fascinating phrase. Know the power of his resurrection? Not just as past event in history but as a dynamic power at work in his life. Elsewhere Romans 8.11 Paul writes

*And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of] his Spirit who lives in you.*

The Spirit of God brings the power of resurrection into your life – the power of life over death, the power to break Satan’s curse, the hold of sin and death, the power to change, the power to live differently. Paul’s ambition is to know that power more and more.

Yet he also says I want to ‘participate in Christ’ s sufferings’: the suffering of Jesus was unlike ours in that he died for our sins. We will never suffer in exactly the way he did. But Jesus suffered for doing what was right, for acting justly, for bringing God’s peace and value to all. When we follow in his way, we can expect suffering – from persecution to ridicule. Jesus suffered due to his compassion and love for all humanity and a world lost in sin, decay, and rebellion. When we have the same mind and heart as Christ, we too will be moved by the suffering around us. It is at moments like these that we experience a participation in the suffering of Christ, and it is that fellowship which Paul wants whatever the cost.

But knowing Christ means sharing his destiny, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. His future hope does not depend on himself but on what Christ has done for him. He is single minded about this ambition pressing on like a runner towards the goal.

With confidence and purpose.

May you find that faith in Christ, in all the changing fortunes of life, gives you confidence and purpose to press on towards the goal for which Christ Jesus took hold of you.

Bibliography:

Nicky Gumbel: A life worth Living, Hodder, 2018, Ch 6

Tim Keller, Making Sense of God, Hodder, 2016, Ch 7

**SONG: All I once held dear**

**A reflective way into prayer**

How do other people see you?
How do you see yourself?
Are the two the same?
How do you think God sees you?
Reflect on these things with honesty and openness.

**Prayers of intercession**

God of one and God of all, we pray for:
those who don’t know who they are,
who can’t understand themselves or their place in society –
**God of all, we pray for them.**
Those who don’t ‘fit in’,
who are or seem to be different –
**God of all, we pray for them.**
Those who don’t know where they come from,
their heritage or home, their family or bloodline –
**God of all, we pray for them.**
Those who feel lost and isolated, confused and afraid,
rudderless or homeless, strangers in a strange land –
**God of all, we pray for them.**
Those who wish they were someone else,
or somewhere else, in some other time and place –
**God of all, we pray for them.**
In your great mercy, Lord,
hear our prayers and grant surer journeys for them all.
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Almighty God, we are going on a journey,
from church back to (wherever it may be).
But we also go on another journey:
the journey of our Christian life.
Its foundations, full of all that has gone before,
are part of the scaffold of our lives.
Some of it can be seen by others,
some only by ourselves;
some is very obvious,
some more hidden.
But it is there. It is a personal journey
– no one else’s is quite the same
– but you know it and you know all of us,
and we trust you to guide us,
to give us the strength, the courage and the persistence we need
to follow where you lead even if the path is tough.
Be our guide, we pray.

Through Christ give us confidence and purpose.

**Amen.**

**HYMN: Fight the good fight**

**Blessing**

Know Christ, know the power of his resurrection and share in the fellowship of his sufferings

And the blessing of God be with you