

Sermon Given by

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Philippians 3:12-4:1 - "Homeward bound"

When I first began to follow Jesus Christ at the age of 16, one of the big anxieties I had was that I had grown up in a home where no-one, so far as I knew, took Jesus Christ seriously. I was terrified what they would think of me, because to be enthusiastic about Jesus Christ was, apparently, so odd. In the end I need not have worried. My family adopted a very relaxed approach, because they assumed that my Christian faith was going to be a short-lived teenage craze. Like the rock and roll music and the brill cream I wore in my hair...

Well, getting on for thirty years later, we can perhaps say that their prediction has proven false – the brill cream has gone but the Christian faith hasn't – and yet... how many of us who have been in the Christian life for a while are as eager as we once were. How many of us have settled down into an easy-going respectable version of Christianity. The first century believers faced imprisonment and even death for their discipleship. They would have found it almost impossible to recognise the diluted version that passes off for Christianity today.

And what about the latest list of statistics with their grim analysis of how many young people are leaving the church each week, each month, each year.

The call of chapter 4:1 is certainly apt for us to hear, if you will just cast an eye down to it again: ¹Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

Even if you are not yet a Christian it is worth you taking the whole idea of perseverance seriously. There is much more to being a Christian than simply saying a prayer of commitment one day and giving no thought to the ongoing commitment down the years.

The apostle Paul has already encouraged the Philippians he was writing to to stand firm for the faith of the gospel in chapter 1. Here he repeats the call: I love you here and now, you Philippians, and you are the focus of all my future longings too – I won't be satisfied till you stand firm all the way to heaven, because I am considering your presence there to be the victory crown I receive after all my years of ministry. So don't you give up: stand firm in the Lord.

So often what causes people to give up is that they have been given an unrealistic idea what to expect of the normal Christian life.

Paul is wonderfully realistic here: and I want to break the verses into three sections each contributing something for a balanced perspective which helps people to keep going.

Here is the first: **True Christian maturity.**

That's in verses 12-16, but before we re-read those verses let's remember what we were looking at last time. Paul has been speaking about his desire to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. He knows Jesus is alive, because he had met him on the Road to Damascus - and he wants the power of the Living Lord Jesus to be at work in his life, so that

he will become like him in sharing in his suffering – and eventually share in his resurrection enjoying the new age with his dear Lord and Saviour.

Then he enters in a note of qualification in verses 12. ¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

I've summarised that before in three words beginning with the letter p. Not **perfection**, but **progress** towards a **prize**. He is clear that he hasn't yet attained the perfection of the resurrection age. He is not in heaven yet. But he is making progress.

And I love the example of single-mindedness he sets. Billy Graham said of one of his colleagues, Dawson Trotman, in a funeral oration. "With Dawson it was not a case of 'these forty things I dabble in', but 'One thing I do'". I imagine he learned that from Paul. The Apostle was absolutely single-minded in his discipleship. Nothing else mattered to him: he forgot the past – its failures were all forgiven and its successes – his religious background and achievements – were rubbish compared to knowing Christ. He pressed on for the future, with all the energy and commitment of an athlete straining for the finishing line: think of Eric Liddell in Chariots of Fire, chest out, head held high, legs and arms pumping furiously as he tears down the back straight to the finish to win the gold medal.

But don't miss the point: You do not work single-mindedly at progress if you are convinced you have already arrived. Twice he says I don't consider myself to have made it.

Too often people make shipwreck spiritually because they want the perfection of heaven early. Please be reassured the future prize is not in doubt, because that rests on God, not on us –he has taken hold of us, he has called us heavenwards. So the outcome is guaranteed. But it still lies in the future.

It is a great mistake to think that we have the perfection of heaven early in some way: maybe people think that they can know God's detailed plans for their life perfectly; but if you persuade yourself that God told you to do x and x doesn't work out, you have set yourself up for disillusionment.

Or that God has promised complete victory over sin. The temptations we face are like those telephone sales agents: it doesn't matter how many times you say no, they still keep getting in touch and we know if we are honest that we are not beyond their reach. It always sounds like maturity to say we have reached perfection, but here is the biblical balance - not perfection, but progress towards the prize.

That is true Christian maturity and that is exactly how Paul describes it in verses 15-6:

¹⁵All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Do you see there how this is not just something for an apostle: this is the perspective of all mature Christians – to the extent that Paul assumes that God will bring people round to this point of view if they don't yet share it.

I love the way he models maturity by not stamping his feet and underlining his letter in red at this point. He just states the truth and leaves it for God to carry it home to their hearts and minds – isn't that absolutely consistent with someone who doesn't think of himself as the finished article – he is work in progress and so are they – so long as they all live up to what they have already attained.

True Christian maturity, then. Will you commit yourself to that portrait of the Christian life: not perfection, but progress towards a prize?

Let's move on to another thing that will help us stand firm: **True Christian discernment.**

That's in verses 17 -19, where he calls on the Philippians to distinguish between those who follow the apostle's example and those who don't. Because Paul knew very well that there were other voices in Philippi than his own. And he knew that they would be attractive to hard-pressed Christians, for one simple reason: what they offered was easier...

He starts in verse 17: with the positive: ***¹⁷Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.***

The example and the pattern he talks about is presumably what we saw in that lovely passage in Chapter 2 – the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection. Remember how Jesus didn't consider equality with God something to be gripped tightly onto, but he made himself nothing and became obedient to death – and only then was he vindicated, raised up and given the name that is above every name.

Costly obedience now and glory later in heaven: that is the pattern. That was the pattern Paul lived by, which meant he was willing to face death in a prison cell.

He's even mentioned one or two others who lived that way: Timothy, not serving his own interests but Christ's; Epaphroditus, risking his life for the cause of Christ.

They did it because they knew what the deal was: suffering now; glory later. If Jesus had lived that way and died on the cross for it, what right did his followers have to a more comfortable ride in the Christian life?

And therefore true Christian discernment follows people who live by that pattern **and refuses to follow other voices.** Let me re-read the warning from verse ***¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the***

cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

Paul is clear that there are plenty of religious people who live according to a different pattern – an easy life in the here and now. I assume he is talking about the same opponents we thought about last week – the dogs of Chapter 3 verse 2.

They were Jewish opponents of the Christian message: When Paul says, '**their God is their stomach**', that is probably a sarcastic reference to the food laws they lived for. When he says, '**their glory is their shame**', that is probably a dig at circumcision. They glory in something and get all excited about something which is so shameful that modesty means you keep it covered up.

Most tellingly he describes them as '**enemies of the cross**'. By nature human beings are hostile to the cross for two reasons: partly that it is very humbling. It tells us that we're not good enough for God, however good we think we are. Our sin is so serious that Jesus needed to die for it. And we cannot save ourselves. Which is humbling: we would far rather take credit for our own salvation. The cross is much too humbling.

The other problem we have is that the cross is very demanding – because if Jesus did that for me, how can I say back to him: 'I'll follow you, but only up to a point'? If he is my Lord and Master and he suffered for me, then by definition I must be willing to suffer, if I follow him.

So the cross is the touchstone for our Christian discernment. If people want an easier religion and an easier life, they always ditch the cross.

That's what the opponents of verses 18-9 had done. Their message was about a god with whom all would be well if you just got circumcised and kept a few food laws. Nothing very humbling there – it doesn't ruffle human pride by telling you 'you're a sinner who needs to be saved.' And nothing very demanding either. Missing out on pork is no big deal, really. Even getting circumcised is only temporarily uncomfortable.

It's easy religion, and it goes down well with everyone – because we all want an easy life, without suffering. And to lose discernment and become religious becomes the back door to giving up on the cross and giving up on Christ.

So let's take to heart this little portrait of true Christian discernment. Watch out for bogus, cross-less versions of the Christian faith. There are lots of them in circulation. Versions which say you don't have to speak up for Christ, because everyone's way will get them there in the end. That is a cross-less PC version of the Christian faith which makes for a quiet life. Or the version which says that God affirms us all as we are – so we don't actually use words like sin or call people to repentance. Instead we just welcome them in to join our religious club – but we are strangely silent about the cross and how that deals with our sin so we can be welcomed into heaven.

It all stems from having our mind on earthly things - no eternal perspective. Which is why our last section in verses 20-21 is so important.

The True Christian Destination.

²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

As opposed to being earthly minded, the Christian knows that they belong in the world to come. They may hold a GB passport, but their citizenship is actually in heaven. That is their primary loyalty; that is where their identity is truly found. And more than anything about them, it is where their Saviour is to be found.

Their destination there is guaranteed – his resurrection is the guarantee and the fore-runner of their resurrection. And when he returns he will remake their bodies to be like his. The outcome is not in doubt.

But do notice the way this verse, with all its bright hope, is tempered with realism.

For the moment our bodies are lowly bodies – only when Christ returns from heaven will they be transformed to be glorious bodies.

So at the moment our bodies wear out: our bodily strength wanes, our mental powers fail, our eyesight gets strained and as we get older we experience the humiliations of illness more and more. The trips to the doctor come more frequently and they are more serious.

And all the while our bodies are still lowly in the sense that, as we have already seen, they are still the sphere of ongoing sinfulness. They are not yet perfectly adapted to serving God; instead our weariness or our physical appetites often drag us down. We don't have the energy to pray or read our Bibles as we want to in our better moments.

And how wonderful when Christ returns to be saved from the very presence of sin and from all its legacy. Someone put it that even the dullest and least interesting of us will be so transformed that others would be strongly tempted to worship us.

But don't forget that that lies in the future.

I like the story of the old BF Westcott, Regius professor of Divinity at Cambridge and afterwards Bishop of Durham: he was asked once on a bus, by a Salvation Army lassie (undeterred by the old fashioned gaiters that bishops used to wear on their legs) whether he was saved: and he replied with a twinkle in his eye: 'Well, my dear, it depends what you mean: do you mean being saved, about to be saved or having been saved?'

Pastorally those three tenses of our salvation are hugely important to hang on to. IN the past I have been saved from the penalty of sin, when Christ died for my sins on the cross. In the present I am being saved from the power of sin – as the Spirit of the living Lord Jesus gets to work gradually on my character and I press on, day by day. In the future I will be saved from the very presence of sin when Jesus Christ returns – it is not yet – I'm in the waiting game according to verse 20; but there's no question about it, because he has the power to bring everything into submission to himself – including my lowly body, ravaged as it is by sin and sin's legacy.

And that will be worth waiting for.

Just think as we close what exams, pregnancy and engagement all have in common. Do you agree with me – no-one would ever get through any of them if there wasn't an end in sight. A holiday to have; a baby to be born; or a partner to walk through life with at the end of it.

None of them are states of existence which you'd want to be permanent. I read about an engagement which lasted 44 years (it wasn't in fact the longest in this country – but still pretty amazing): he was 72 and she was 68 when they finally married and they had got through 4 engagement rings, because the previous three had worn out.

Not exactly ideal is it. Normally what keeps you going through engagement is the prospect of getting married. And what keeps you standing firm as a Christian is the rock solid hope of heaven. Remember the true Christian destination. The Christian life isn't just the here and now. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)