

## Having our priorities straight Philippians 3.4-14 Jos M. Strengholt

Song 2090 from our songbook says,

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

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

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

Beautiful words of the apostle Paul. But what does St Paul mean with this? 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?

### **1. surpassing worth of knowing JC**

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.

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

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 inside knowledge.

And there is another mysterious personal aspect. We meet with him in worship: when we kneel for Holy Eucharist, when we commune with him in prayer. In those moments we actually experience a deepening of the knowledge we have - because He is there with us to blow life into our factual knowledge.

The people who truly serve God are those, Paul says in verse 3, "who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh".

“We worship by the Spirit of God”.

This refers to how the Holy Spirit that God promised so often in the Old Testament, was given to be in the midst of the people of God, even in our personal lives. We are the Temple in which God resides.

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 having the right dogma less important, but it is not all there is.

Because of this knowledge of Jesus Christ, we glory in Christ Jesus and we put no confidence in the flesh.

We praise our Lord for who he is, and we do not trust in ourselves.

## **2. count all as loss**

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 thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

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.

Paul could be proud of his national background. He came from a good family. He knew his religion well. He lived by it from moment to moment. “Look at me, good boy! God must be so pleased with me!”

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

He concluded 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. Meeting with Jesus did not make things dim, but in his light Paul saw the truth.

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. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

You would almost think that Paul totally rejected his background, that all things of earth grew dim... but that is not how we must understand these powerful words. From many other parts of Paul’s writings we know he was proud of his Jewish background.

But compared to knowing Christ, it was 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."

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 value to all things.

Knowing that he is the Lord of all nations; that he gave humankind its desire to develop culture; that Jesus Christ gave us the abilities to develop this world, that should not make us despise our world, our own heritage. It gives it extra value.

Only in the light of Jesus Christ do we truly appreciate our life, our world, our cultures, for what they are. In the light of Jesus Christ, the things on earth become not dim, but we seem them sharper. We see them better. We value them better.

By counting all loss compared to knowing Christ, Paul wanted to know Jesus Christ more, but that did not make other things less valuable. I think it makes them more valuable as they get their real value as expressions of God's 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.

But being right with God actually makes our money, our house, our job more enjoyable. If we reject all we have as roads to happiness and salvation, and we gain our Lord Christ, we receive all things back from him - enlightened by his presence.

By recognizing that nothing in this life can give us eternal joy, and by embracing Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, God makes us enjoy all things more - because He becomes involved in it.

Art, music, beauty, goodness, friendships, health, they are all gifts from God. We must not despise the reality we live in; we must not look down on normal life. We must rather baptize it with the presence of our Lord, and 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. Because of the presence of the Lord.

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.

Our country, our family, being a law-abiding religious person cannot make us right with God; that is accomplished by the presence of Jesus Christ in the house of our life.

And if the Lord is in the house, 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 then start the process of knowing the Lord better.

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

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 some storms.

### **3. 'Christ Jesus has made me his own'**

Paul expresses *his hope* that as he suffered with Christ, he would therefore also share in his resurrection.

He *hoped* for it. Was he not sure of his salvation? He says in verse 11 and 12 that he becomes like Jesus in his death

... that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 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? Yes and no. No, he is not sure, because he realizes that in order to attain the resurrection from the dead, he must persevere in the faith, even in the midst of suffering for Christ.

He also 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 sure of himself - he knew he did all God wanted from him. He knew 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, and we will therefore in this life never be perfect.

So things on earth did not get dim, and Paul did not see himself in a soft light. He was under much pressure for Christ - in prison - and he knew that he was not perfect yet, so he pressed on, motivated to hold on to the faith.

Why did Paul know his imperfections? Exactly because Jesus was on board of his life. And that 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". Owned by Christ - that is the most secure place in the world.

We are - at this very moment - owned by Christ. We are safe in his hands.

It is the very security of the relationship that makes us desire to live for him, to know him, to know him more.

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.

### **Conclusion**

In making one's way in the direction of perfection it is important to be always trying to advance spiritually. 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 move forward. In His light we can be brutally honest about our imperfection; we see all things sharper. We see the whole world and ourselves in his light.

Our response to this should be, like Paul, to seek to know Jesus Christ more. 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. But to know him more, better, deeper.