

Philippians 3:4b-14**Are we there yet?**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we witnessed the beginning of a new life in Christ. As Hugh was baptised (at Robertstown), he became a child of God, and his journey as one who belongs to God has begun. This is not one of those journeys where the incessant question of 'are we there yet?' finally gets a positive answer. The journey of being a disciple of Christ Jesus is one that lasts for all eternity. If we ever think we've made it, and there's no more learning to do, no more growing to do, then we're deluding ourselves. And likewise, if we think we've completely stuffed it up, and there's no chance of ever reaching the goal, then we're forgetting that God is merciful and abounding in steadfast love.

The only suitable response is the one St Paul describes in our second reading today:

Brothers and sisters, 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, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 3:13-14, NIV)

We see here that Paul considers himself to be living in a state of continual movement. He's in the middle of a journey. The longing for arrival is strong, but what he has in front of him is the journey. He can only press on, stay the course. Unlike his past, St Paul knows that his future is not primarily about him. It's all about God. It's about the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord.

Jesus is the point where our past and our future meet. His faithful obedience and his death on the cross put our past behind us and free us for a new future in him. And this great promise is delivered to us in baptism. For those of us whose baptisms happened a few years ago now, the temptation is to think that we've done it all, there's nothing left to do. But do you see how that is again looking to the past? We, like St Paul, are no longer to find our life, our purpose, our worth, our identity, in the past, but only in the ongoing discovery of who we are in Christ.

This is incredibly freeing, but at the same time quite scary, perhaps insulting, and certainly difficult to grasp and comprehend. God will continually draw us out from the things that are familiar and comfortable and pull us towards his purposes for our lives. We all have our personal stories, some of which we cherish, some of which we would gladly bury. In either case, we often feel that our identity is bound up in those stories.

For St Paul, it was all about his family, his nationality, his faith, and his accomplishments, some of which he had since come to regret. His identity was bound up in a set of given relationships, as well as personal achievements and failures. In fact, his greatest achievement, his perfection according to the Law of Moses, led directly to his greatest failure, the persecution of the Christian church. And so, having once considered his personal story as a kind of asset, now he considers it loss or even garbage to what he has now found in Christ.

Then St Paul uses the image of a race to describe the Christian life. And it makes quite a bit of sense here. A runner who keeps glancing over his shoulder will not win the race. Rather, the one who keeps his 'eyes on the prize' will stay on track. And the runner who mistakes the half-way marker for the goal and stops there, saying 'I made it' will not actually properly finish the race.

So, St Paul says he hasn't yet reached the goal. This hero of the Christian faith, responsible for much of the New Testament writings, says he's not there yet. He knows his journey with Christ is not yet finished. In contrast to some, Paul does not claim to have reached the goal or perfection yet. Paul may be concerned that there are some in Philippi who think they have arrived at the goal, simply because they are in Christ and have begun the race. And Paul had every reason to claim that he had it all sorted. We heard his list earlier in the bible reading. But the more Paul grows in his faith in Christ Jesus, the more he realises that he has so much more to go.

This is true for all of us too. If we're finished, it implies we don't need any more of God. We've got enough. This doesn't fit with the pattern of discipleship we find in scripture. The expectation is that even those who have died and gone to be with the Lord will always be desiring more of God's goodness and love. And so, this is why we are given a two-fold instruction.

The first involves forgetting what lies behind us. Dwelling on the past can be a huge hindrance to making progress on something, acting like a ball and chain holding you back. It might be dwelling on things that you regret doing or neglected to do. If we think about Paul's life, how he zealously persecuted the early church, imagine what would have happened if he had dwelt on that too much. Nothing he could have done would have been able to make it go away. What about the alternative, dwelling on good things that happened in the past? Surely that couldn't be as big a problem. But the risk is that if you're resting on past achievements, you aren't preparing for future ones. This doesn't mean we ignore the past completely. God uses everything in our lives to show us his grace and mercy and to teach us to live with grace and mercy towards others. But he does so as a means to get us moving along the journey he wants us to take.

The second thing is to strain toward what lies ahead. There are always more opportunities to do good, always more opportunities to learn from God's grace and mercy, always more opportunities to serve a neighbour in need. All those past missed opportunities are forgiven, and God continues to give us more along our journey with him. There's a great joy that lies behind all this that you may not have picked up on in what St Paul wrote. Being baptised into Christ Jesus means that every day is a new start, every day our past mistakes are wiped clean, we are forgiven, and God renews us again to do his will.

So, wherever you think you are on this journey through life, may you know that God is with you. May you find his forgiveness for your past mistakes, and his strength to press on toward the future. May you realise that as long as you live on this earth, there is always something more to strive towards. And may you find the great joy that comes from spending eternity with Jesus Christ, who has redeemed you and called you his own, always drawing you to him, and always showing you his perfect love and mercy. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.