

PHIL 3.8-11: I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST! EXPERIENCING THE POWER OF RESURRECTION [Chelmsford 13 April 2008]

In some circles ***ambition has had a bad press***: e.g.

- Pope John 23rd once said: "*The ambitious are the most ridiculous and the most wretched creatures on earth*"
- According to one Arab proverb: "*Every ambitious man is a captive and every covetous one is a pauper*"
- Shakespeare in *Henry VIII* has the dying Cardinal Wolsey say to Cromwell: "*I charge thee, Cromwell, fling away ambition. By that sin, fell the angels: how can man, then, the image of his Maker, hope to gain by it?*"

But I'm not convinced that ambition in itself is wrong.

Everything depends upon the nature of the ambition.

- If your ambition is simply to make lots of money to spend on yourself, that is a poor and selfish ambition.
- But if your ambition is to make lots of money in order to establish a hospice or help another group of people in need, that would be a very different matter.

What's your ambition in life? What do you want to be? What do you want to achieve? What if anything is driving you?

I would imagine that many of us have ***a number of ambitions***.

Let me mention two of my ambitions which are driving me at the present:

- As chairman of the programme committee of the Chelmsford Christian Festival, my ambition is to see the 1000-seater marquee at least 80% full every night. Now that's quite an ambition. It's going to mean many of the members of the town-centre churches attending at least two of the main evening events – and what's more attending them not just on our own, but with non-church friends. This ambition is not just because I am concerned for the financial viability of the festival, but above all because I want to see our town impacted by the Gospel. My ambition is to see 300+ begin to attend Alpha courses in the autumn as a result of the festival.
- As minister of this church, my ambition is to see our church in particular make the most of the opportunities of the Chelmsford Christian Festival. I want all the members of our church taking friends not just to two of the main events, but to three events. What's more, I want many of those friends wanting to come along to our Alpha course – I want many of them to start coming to church – I want to see many of them come to faith and be baptized. My ambition is to see every member of our congregation investing their time, their energy, and their prayers into this festival, so that in the coming year or two most of our growth will be from conversions rather than from transfers.

But ***these ambitions are relatively short-term***:

- The time will come when the Chelmsford Christian Festival is a thing of the past. Indeed, the time will come when I am no longer the minister of this church. So what, you might ask, is my lifetime ambition? What is the one thing I want to do or be in this life?
- Or let me put the focus back on you, ***what is your life time ambition?*** What is the one thing you would do or be?

The Apostle Paul could have answered that question without difficulty. Writing to the church at Philippi he said: "**I want to know Christ**" (3.10). This was his lifetime's ambition. This was the thing above all he wanted to do. Compared to knowing Christ, nothing else had any importance whatsoever. Look at v8: "**I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere refuse, so that I may gain Christ**" Or as Peterson puts it in *The Message*: "**Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant – dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him**".
I.e. to know Christ is everything – it knocks every other ambition into a hat.

TO KNOW CHRIST IS EVERYTHING

As I reflected on Paul's ambition this week, I found myself incredibly challenged. I found myself asking the question: "*Is knowing Christ everything to me? Do I really want to know Christ that much?*"
As a minister, a professional holy man, if you like, I found myself replying: "*Of course, Christ is everything to me - of course, I really want to know Christ*".
Yet honesty compels me to say, there are times when other things get in the way - there are times when the church gets in the way - when meeting the needs of other people get in the way....
The reality is that there have been times when knowing Christ has not always been everything!

But enough of myself. How is it for you?
Is Christ everything to do? Do you want to know Christ more than anything else? Is knowing Christ your overriding ambition?

"I want to know Christ"

By this Paul didn't mean to say that he wanted to know facts about Christ - he wanted to know him personally.

For Jews the word "**to know**" could have a sense of deep *intimacy* - in the Book of Genesis, e.g. we read that "Adam knew Eve": i.e. he had sex with her.

For a Jew to know a person was more than knowing about them, it involved knowing them in a deep, intimate, personal manner.

"**I want to know Christ**" i.e. Paul wanted to have a *deep personal relationship* with Christ.

Paul goes on to spell out what it means to know Christ

1. TO KNOW CHRIST IS TO EXPERIENCE RESURRECTION POWER

"I want to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection"

To know Christ involves experiencing the power of his resurrection in the here & now.

Wow - that really is something! I wonder how many of us have taken that fact on board.

Sometimes we Christians act as though we believe that Christ only deals with our past sin, whereas the fact is that he offers power for living life in the present.

Sometimes we have a limited view of what Christ has to offer. Listen to Paul writing to the Ephesians: **"I ask that your minds may be opened to see his light, so that you will know... how very great is his power at work in us who believe. This power working in us is the same as the mighty strength which he used when he raised Christ from death and seated him at his right side in the heavenly world"** (Eph 1.18-20)

The resurrection is not just a doctrine to be believed - it is a power to be experienced. What's more, it's not just a power to be experienced as we lie on our death-beds, but rather a power to be experienced in the midst of life - today in fact!

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection".

The Greek word underlying the English word **power** is the word from which we get '*dynamite*' (*dunamis*).

Just as a stick of dynamite can demolish the most powerful of obstacles, so the power of Christ in our lives can enable us to overcome the most difficult of obstacles.

Unlike some modern theologians, for Paul the Gospel of Easter did not create a problem - rather it meant power in the here and now.

But ***power for what?*** It is not power for power's sake

Nor is it power for the sake of self-advancement...

The power Paul has in mind is the power of Christ - it therefore cannot be the power that promotes self-advancement, but rather it is the ***power to live a Christ-like life***

- It is power to love the unlovely and the unloving
- It is power to seek the good of others and not the good of self

It is also power to cope with all the ups and downs of life

A little later in this letter Paul writes: **"I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learnt this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full of hungry, whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives"** (4.12,13).

Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase, *The Message*: ***"Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it"*** - Paul could make it through the power of Christ which strengthened him in his inner being.

For those who know him, the risen Saviour can be relied upon as a resource person to help us deal with all the challenges life throws at us.

No wonder Paul wanted to know Christ!

2. TO KNOW CHRIST IS TO SHARE HIS SUFFERINGS

If we are truthful, this comes as a surprising & an unwelcome statement.

We all want power, but none of us in our right mind wants suffering

Yet Paul writes: **"I want to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, [AND] to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death"**

What does this mean? What sufferings does Paul have in mind?

The clue is found toward the beginning of this letter.

There Paul speaks about "**fighting together for the sake of the gospel**" (1.27)

He goes on: "**You have been given the privilege of serving Christ, not only by believing in him, but also by suffering for him**" (1.29).

The suffering Paul has in mind is not putting up with arthritis or a bad back, but rather a suffering for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of others.

If the sufferings of Christ were for the salvation of the world, then it seems reasonable to conclude that to share in the sufferings of Christ is to share in suffering for the sake of the salvation of others.

Or to put it another: ***we begin to share in the sufferings of Christ when mission is foremost on our agenda***

Life can be comfortable when the church is simply a holy club and the minister's life centres around keeping members happy

But nobody can really know Christ without wanting to share him with others.

And when we do begin to share Jesus with others, then difficulties can and do arise.

OK, we may not suffer persecution in the way in which Paul & the Christians at Philippi suffered persecution - but there will be times when we will experience resistance, there will be times when we will experience misunderstanding...

We may not have to sacrifice our lives for the sake of the Gospel, but if we truly mean business, then we will certainly expend a good deal of time, energy & effort for the sake of Christ.

Let's be honest, for many of us ***life would be much easier if we were not concerned to share the Good News of Jesus with others.***

Just think of all those church activities we could do without.

Indeed, just think of how much simpler life would be this summer if we didn't have the Chelmsford Christian Festival.

Life would be much more comfortable if we didn't have to think about the spiritual welfare of others

But at this point ***Paul by his very example sets us a challenge.***

"**I want to know Christ... & to share in his sufferings**" - to know Christ means experiencing not only his power, but also his passion for others - and where there is a passion for others, there is inevitably a degree of '**suffering**'.

Actually, I almost feel ashamed to apply this word 'suffering' to ourselves - because few if any of us have had to go through the pain that Paul did for Christ.

Yet even today the truth is that if we wish to know Christ, then we must die to self, to self-interest, and living for him and for him alone!

But thank God, we are not called to live for Christ in our own strength.

For to know Christ is not only to share in his sufferings, it is also to experience the power of his resurrection.

Indeed, may it not be significant that here Paul puts Easter before Good Friday.

It is in the power of the resurrection that we are called to share the sufferings of Jesus

3. TO KNOW CHRIST IS TO HAVE A HOPE THAT GOES BEYOND THE GRAVE

Suffering shall not have the last word. Here in these verses Easter not only precedes Good Friday, it also follows Good Friday

"All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings & become like him in his death, (v11) in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life.

Whether expressed in quiet personal tones or with trumpet blasts, the resurrection from the dead was always central to Paul and to his faith

NB 1 Cor 15.19: **"If our hope in Christ is good for this life only & no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world"**

Or as he wrote in this letter to the church at Philippi: **"For what is life? To me, it is Christ. Death then, will bring more"** (1.21)

Death for Paul no longer held any terrors: it had lost its sting

1 Cor 15.57: **"Thanks be to God who gives us the victory over death"**

Death for Paul was but the gateway into an even more glorious life

But do notice here in Philippians that *Paul's focus is not on eternal life 'per se' - but rather on life with Christ.*

- Here in Phil 3 the statement **"I want to know Christ"** controls everything which follows.
- So in Phil 1.23, when Paul is speaking of the life to come, he says: **"I want to be with Christ"**

The goal of the resurrection, the prize for which Paul strains every effort in the present (3.12), is Christ himself. Then we shall see Christ **"face to face"** - then our knowledge of Christ will be **"complete"** (1 Cor 13.12). What a wonderfully fulfilling experience that will be.

Or at least, it will be a wonderfully fulfilling experience for those who have begun to know Christ. But this leads me to ask the question: *"Do you know Christ? Have you begun to develop a relationship with him? Have you discovered the new life that he wants to offer us all?"* Where do you stand as far as the Christian faith is concerned?

Maybe there are some here tonight who have yet to open their hearts & welcome the Lord Jesus into their hearts and lives.

But maybe there others, who have as it were opened the door of their hearts to him, but frankly have not developed a relationship with him. You believe, but if the truth be told your faith is more a matter of words than experience.

Whoever you are, wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, let me encourage you to make a priority of knowing Christ.

Let me encourage you as you eat bread & drink wine this morning, to focus on the Christ who not only died for you, but also who rose for you, & who is present among us even now by his Spirit. With the Apostle Paul say: **"I want to know Christ & to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings & become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life"**.

Knowing Christ makes all the difference - so let him become everything to you..