

## **PHIL 3.13: FORGET THE PAST AND FOCUS ON THE FUTURE**

*[Chelmsford New Year's Eve 2013]*

It is not often that I am given a text just for me, But recently I received an email from Nicholas Tuohy, a much loved former associate minister now pastor of a church in Melbourne, Australia, which contained the following paragraph:

*Thank you for your Christmas letter. I'm sure you have many feelings as you head towards retirement from CBC. I hope and pray not least of which are feelings of gratitude and satisfaction for the way God has used you to build solid biblical and gospel-centred ministries. Having just worked through Philippians with our congregation, the following passage [ from Phil 3] comes to mind: <sup>12</sup> **Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.** <sup>13</sup> **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,** <sup>14</sup> **I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.***

I confess that I was quite moved – and challenged – by the Scripture Nicholas shared with me. As I was thinking about what to say tonight, I thought I would reflect more generally on this Scripture further, and in particular on Phil 3.13: **The one thing I do... is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead**

In the light of these words of Paul, I have two simple points to make

### **1. FORGET THE PAST**

That may seem a strange point to make in the context of a service when we have been remembering the past – and thanking God for his goodness over the past 12 months. And of course we are right to do so. We are called to be thankful people.

But, we are not just to be sun-set people – we are also to be sun-rise people. In that respect we are indeed called to forget the past.

Listen again to the words of Paul: "**The one thing I do is to forget what is behind me**"

Paul has just likened the Christian life to a race: "**I keep striving to win the prize**" he wrote. Paul realizes that if he is to win the race, then he can't afford to look back. For a runner who keeps looking back is never going to win - such a runner is liable to stumble - certainly the pace will lessen.

Here is a lesson for us too.

In our Christian lives we can't afford to be ever looking backwards.

Indeed, it has been said: "*Nothing in life needs to be managed more carefully than memory, for nothing can hurt us or hinder us more than this stored-up past*" (James Reid, in a sermon on 'The Management of the Memory' **The Temple in the Heart** 161f)

So as we enter 2014, the question arises: what precisely do we need to forget?

Let me list some possibilities:-

- ***We may need to forget past failures.*** The past need not haunt us or control us - with Christ we can begin again - even after we have stumbled and fallen, we can still get back into the race and run. It does us no good to brood over past failures. Some of us know exactly where we have failed God in the past and we are still ashamed of it. We keep ugly skeletons in the closets of our memory and think it virtuous to open the door occasionally and torture ourselves by remembering what these skeletons looked like when they were clothed in flesh and blood of sin. But the Good News is that we may bury our past. It is not that God overlooks our sin - but he has done something about our sin. As Paul put it in Col 2: "**God forgave us all our sins; he cancelled the unfavourable record of our debts... and did away with it completely by nailing it to the cross**".
- ***We may need to forget past happinesses.*** That may seem a strange thing to forget, but we shall never make any progress in the Christian life we continually hark back to what we deem were happier times. It's very easy for the bereaved, for instance, to live in the past, to forever compare the present unfavourably with the past, and in this way never come to terms with the challenges of the present. Of course we cannot forget loved ones - but we must not allow the death of a loved one to stop our ongoing walk with God.
- ***We may need to forget past hurts.*** We will make no progress in the Christian life if we harbour persistent bitterness about past wrongs and hurts. However much we have been wronged, we have to learn to forgive and then to let go. For all I know, it may be that there is someone in your family or maybe someone in this church against whom you have a grudge. However justified that grudge, for heaven's sake get rid of it. Nothing can be more destructive than resentment. Nothing can hinder us more in the Christian life than dwelling on the past wrongs of others.
- ***We may need to forget past achievements.*** That too may sound strange, but, the context indicates that probably it is this which Paul has in mind in particular. For before he became a Christian, Paul had everything going for him. After spelling out his impressive Jewish pedigree, he says "**As far as a person can be righteous by obeying the commands of the Law, I was without fault**" (3.6). But then he realised that his so-called achievements were actually a stumbling block to the new life that God was calling him to. Yes, the reality is that success can as much paralyse action as failure. We may be so impressed with the progress we have made, that we fail to realise how much more progress God would have us make. It is all too easy to sit back on our laurels and become complacent .

I wonder, as we enter 2014, what is it that you need to forget about the past?

Indeed, what is it that I need to forget?

Let me honest with you, I am struggling to come to terms with the fact that in less than three months time I will no longer be your pastor. And that is tough.

Indeed, I was almost in tears taking a home communion as I realised that this was perhaps one of the very last I would do.

In one sense I cannot forget my past 21 years as your pastor – how could I?  
And yet I cannot remain bound by the past, I need to move to the future.  
And that is precisely why, I guess, that Nicholas drew my attention to these words of Paul

## 2. FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

**"The one thing I do is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize**  
Other versions speak of "*straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal*" (so NRSV; similarly NIV).

REB: "*straining towards what lies ahead, I press on towards the finishing line, to wing the heavenly prize*"

According to one commentator, "*Paul's language is vivid, tense, repetitious: pressing, stretching, pushing, straining. In those words the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the heart pumps, the perspiration rolls*". (Fred Craddock 62).

Paul here is describing a runner going hard for the tape. He has eyes for nothing but the goal - with arms almost clawing the air, head forward, the whole body bent and angled to the goal. Paul's language describes a person going flat out for the finish.

Of course the metaphor is not perfect. It breaks down.  
In a race only one wins the prize, whereas in the Christian race there are many winners. But the metaphor holds in this one respect - we need to keep giving it everything we've got.

Yes, there should never come a point in life when we coast.  
For me retirement is not the end of ministry, but simply a new stage in my ministry.  
God will still have a call for my life.  
Not for me a rocking chair – where I may sit and wile away the hours.  
I want to rise to the challenge of the new opportunities for service that God is giving me.

But what about you, as you enter 2014.  
What I wonder are the new opportunities for service that God is offering you?  
Is God calling you to serve him in a new way within this church?  
Or is God calling you to serve him in a new way beyond the church?  
The reality is that following Jesus is not a doddle  
He calls us to a life of 'blood, sweat and tears' – he said that to go his way was to go the way of the Cross.

It can be tough being a Christian.  
BUT the prize makes the enterprise more than worthwhile - for it is "**God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above**" (3.14). There is a wonderful future ahead for those who complete the race of faith. What more glorious a prize could there be?.

**"The one thing I do"**! There is no doubt that for Paul his all-consuming ambition was to run the full distance in the Christian race, even although it involved giving all he had got.  
But what about you and me? As we enter 2014 what kind of ambition do we have?