

Knowing Christ

by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 8th October 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings **Philippians 3:1-14** (NB lectionary starts at verse 4b) (Lectionary Year A, Proper 22)
Matthew 21:33-44

Introduction: What is the secret of happiness?

If you were here 3 weeks ago you will remember that I began to explore the question *What is the secret of happiness?* as we began to look at the letter of Paul to the Philippians. There are many answers that we are offered by the world, including:

- Money and financial security
- Nice house, car, holidays
- Good marriage, friendships, children
- Good health
- Interesting job
- Interests and hobbies

Billy Graham's book, *The Secret of Happiness* suggested that in fact, the pursuit of happiness is a mistaken goal: happiness is a by-product of getting our priorities right and putting God at the centre of our lives. And we saw that part of the reason for the joy which Paul expresses in his letter to the Philippians was that he was able to see God in every circumstance – even his imprisonment in Rome. As he faced the prospect of execution, Paul wrote that “for me, to live is Christ, to die is gain”. Having Christ at the centre of his life gave Paul a sense of purpose. You can read my last sermon online if you wish to do some revision!

Who are you?

One ingredient of happiness seems to be being happy with who you are, and that is tied in with this sense of our lives having a meaning, a purpose. So today we are going to explore more about what Paul had learned about that.

I wonder what you would answer if I asked the question *Who are you?* There will be several different ways you could answer this. Let's take a minute to think about the answers we would give ...

Some of the ways we might answer this question would be to do with our relationships – a husband or wife, a son or daughter, a mother or father. Some might be to do with our education, our role at work, our nationality, our interests, our faith.

In chapter 3 Paul addresses one pressing issue for the church of his day, which was to do with the question of whether to be a Christian you also had to submit to Jewish ritual laws such as circumcision. You can see from the wording Paul uses that he had very strong views himself! And this leads him into a very personal account of his change of mind from his old life as a Pharisee to his new life as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Paul says that in his former life what mattered to him was his Jewish identity and his passion to follow the Law. In verses 4-6 he describes how he ticked all the boxes, and if he'd wished he could have mentioned his education under the famous rabbi Gamaliel in this context too. Paul, or Saul as he was then known, had been a formidable warrior for Judaism. But then he had his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, followed by that visit from the disciple Ananias who prayed for him and called him “Brother Saul”. It is this life-changing experience which I think Paul is referring to in verse 12 when he says that “Christ Jesus has made me his own” or in another

translation “Christ Jesus took hold of me” (NIV). As he tried to make sense of that experience over the weeks and months that followed it, he must have come to realise that, far from promoting the interests of the God he thought he served, he had in fact been fighting against him. In terms of today’s gospel reading, Saul the Pharisee had been on the side of those who had beaten and killed God’s messengers, i.e. the wicked tenants in the vineyard.

Saul’s self-confidence in his status as a warrior for God had been completely undermined by his supernatural encounter with Jesus. Now, years later, he was acutely aware of the grace and forgiveness that he had received from the Lord, not least in the fact that Jesus had chosen him to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

Now, Paul says in verse 7, all those achievements and outward trappings which had made up his identity were worthless, complete rubbish in comparison with knowing Christ. All Paul wants now is to know Christ more and become more like him, even if it means suffering and death, because he knows that with Christ is also the promise of resurrection. Paul’s security is no longer in outward circumstances, which can change and over which we may have no control. His security is in Christ. His identity is in Christ. The meaning of his life is knowing Christ.

Paul could have said “formerly my purpose was to destroy the church, now it’s to build the church”. But for Paul, building the church comes second – it’s a consequence of his primary purpose to know Christ.

So what about us? You may not have had a sudden revelation of Christ as Paul did. I certainly haven’t. Each of us is different, and each of us has a relationship with God which is unique. But if you are here today it’s because in one way or another God has impacted your life. You are not the same as you would be without God in your life. How much do you recognise the effect of God and your faith in your sense of identity? Perhaps the challenge to us all from today’s reading from Philippians is to be a bit more intentional about our faith, and to reflect on how big a part Jesus Christ plays in our lives.

Paul gives us an encouragement here: he says that he isn’t perfect yet, and is still work in progress, but, he says in verse 12, “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus”.

Do you want to know Christ better? What steps are you going to take to make this a reality?