

Farewell Sermon Sunday 7th March 2021.

Philippians 3:10 “That I may know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering”

Well, here it is; the card given me at my baptism at Carshalton Beeches Baptist Free Church on 7th December 1969 (I was 17 in case you are trying to work it out). How I got to be there is another story for another time. I had always lived near the church, just up the road.

Here is what the Minister, Rev Norman Renshaw wrote then

“All I care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection”.

And here we are in the most extraordinary circumstances, some 51 years later, with that same verse coming up at this service as I retire as Bishop of Birkenhead, a prospect I can safely say was not in my mind back then. In fact, the local Church of England parish in Carshalton Beeches (much changed now I’m glad to say) had zero impact on me!

Thank you for those who can be here in the Cathedral, and thank you for those who are able to join online; especially those from all across the Diocese of Chester. I know some from Birmingham and Coventry are joining us, and some from quite along way away, from Kent to California, and some from Congo and even Australia.

Perhaps before I say anything else, this is a moment for you to think about your baptism/confirmation, and the story that brought you to that point, and where are you now. And if you have not been baptised or confirmed because your story so far does not include Christ in the way this verse speaks of him, now might be a good time

to think “I wonder what this means?”, and I wonder if he could ever be part of my story, or I of his.

I would like to say something about this verse in a moment, but before I do, would you allow me to say a few other personal words, especially of thanks.

So many have sent cards and letters and I cannot thank you enough for the kindness expressed in them; many mentioning moments I have not remembered and it is so encouraging to hear of them again; thanks to those clergy and communities it’s been possible to connect with online, as all the “normal” ways of meeting to say goodbye and thank you are currently denied to us. Someone heard the broadcast on Radio Merseyside last Sunday, who wrote the most lovely letter, he was 90 when confirmed and is now 101. Thank you, John.

Thank you to +Mark and Lindsay who have shown every kindness to Rosie and me even as they have had to cope with arriving in the most challenging circumstances. To members of the staff team past and present, especially but not only Archdeacons Mike and Ian, who with the whole team have just been immense in their service, friendship and sheer hard work. To Pippa, my longsuffering PA who has seen me through and served for so long with such prayer and dedication. Thank you.

Please forgive me if I don’t name everyone, those here, and those across the whole Diocese, those in Church House in Mission, Ministry, Social Responsibility and Education, our Safeguarding Adviser and Registrar; and thanks to those in the community. I have reason for enormous thanks to the civic leadership especially on Wirral, and for the close partnership with the faith and voluntary sector.

As St Paul says a little before our verse today

“I thank my God every time I remember you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.” (Phil.1:3-5).

We will come to Philippians 3:10 in a moment, but before we do, allow me one more Thank You.

To Rosie and the children, to Peter and Anna, now married to Imogen and Josh, and to David soon to be married to Lydia. I reread the sermon I preached on 10 March 2007 at my installation, and I spoke then of Peter, Anna and David, then aged 14,13 and 10, and said

“Rosie and I praise God for the trust in us and the Lord that our children have shown, and I pay tribute to them and thank God for them”

I still do; and that trust would not have happened without Rosie modelling that trust and love, which she has done faithfully and wonderfully – even through some tough times – and you all know I think, without me saying it, that whatever kind words are said about me, nothing would have happened without Rosie; she has prayed, loved, endured and rejoiced, and kept me going more than she knows; she has exercised her own ministry as Senior Lecturer in the Law Department at Chester University, and that ministry will continue.

So, Philippians 3:10, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” and the part of the verse left off my baptism certificate “and the fellowship (or sharing) of his sufferings”.

And I want to admit at once that in a way these words are too much for me. As I look back over my life, which when you retire, I realise you to do, I recognise these words describe a pattern which goes back to the baptism and before and continues right through to this

very moment. When I was first introduced to Christ and realised to my amazement that it was possible to know Him; to know Jesus of Nazareth, a first century Jewish man, whose brief life continues as unique among us because he was raised from death, and using the metaphor of Hebrews 12 “is seated at the right hand of the majesty on high”, the Son of God, the second person of God the Holy Trinity, the Word made flesh, the Word who was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. The I am.

That Paul could speak of knowing him, as we know one another, as a husband knows his wife, as a brother and sister know one another, as one knows the love and life of a friend, all this knowing is true also of Jesus Christ. To discover he is not remote, or distant, but closer than a brother; who knows the best and the worst about one, and yet whose love and truth and light just keeps pouring in.

As Philippians 3:10 says through “the power of his resurrection”. All this knowing coming from the resurrection, as the river flows from its source, as Paul says in Romans 8:11 “If the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you – he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit that dwells in you”. As Mary meets Jesus in the garden of the first Easter Day and hears him speak her name, so we can hear him speak our name, I can hear him speak my name, and as her world was undone and remade in a moment, so is ours and we discover that the greatest sin and darkness even of death is not the end of the story.

I think Rob and John and Christine may say some kind words in a moment. I’m working on hearing them and receiving them truly. But I tell you, that whatever good you see and have known in me, it has come from that knowing of Christ, and the power of his resurrection.

And a knowing that has not left that last part of the verse out, “the fellowship of his suffering”; if it expands your mind beyond its limits

to imagine sharing in his resurrection, what does it do to us to think of sharing his suffering? A suffering borne by encountering the sin of the world and bearing the sin of others; as Hebrews 12 goes on to say “Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners...” and then “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Heb. 12:3,4).

In our sharing of his sufferings, we are struggling not only because of the sins of others, but because of our own sins, the sins for which he died, AND YET in that struggle which at times is overwhelming, we do not find Jesus looking down his nose at us, or standing at a distance keeping as it were a score card of our unrighteousness, saying at best “Not bad”, rather as a dear friend, with me, in me by his Spirit, not being remotely phased by any of it, rather not being willing to call my sins by any thing other than their real name, invites me into a new knowing which includes Him and the power of his resurrection.

“That I may know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his suffering”

This knowing is the only reason I stand before you today, and is the only reason any of which we celebrate has happened in my life or among us.

And in a way, there is not much more I want to say, other than to ask you about your knowing of him, and whether you recognise this dynamic in your own life and are willing to let him know you more, a knowing that will include resurrection power AND sharing in his suffering. If this knowing is quite unknown in your life, please don't write Jesus off, or imagine he must inevitably be distant or remote from you. How could the Lord of glory love someone like me, a kid from Carshalton Beeches, and not love you too?

But because this is my last sermon as Bishop of Birkenhead, and because at least those listening online can go and get a cup of coffee, pausing and coming back to this later, would you allow me to say just two more things about these verses, and draw two inferences?

I will try to be brief and hope you cannot catch the eye of Rosie and the children, who have experience of my brief graces before a family meal!

Two other dimensions to knowing Christ:

1. Go to verse 8 Paul writes “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”: in other words, if we are to know Christ at all, it is we know him as Lord, as my Lord. This means everything in St Paul’s life which has defined him must now be reassessed, his Hebrew ancestry and religious credentials, and everything in our life too; there cannot be any ethnic or national or any other characteristic in us that claims an authority over Jesus Christ. We say it at our baptism and confirmation but do we know it and are we living it? It means none of us can know Jesus on our terms, it means knowing Him on his, men and women, rich and poor, old and young, ordained and lay, diocese and Church of England.
2. But if knowing him as Lord seems too much for us, there is another verse which will help. Go to verse 12 where Paul writes “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal (who could claim perfect obedience this side of heaven?) but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own”.

And this thought, Christ Jesus has made me his own. How is knowing Christ possible? Because he would like to make himself known to me and you, and more than “would like”, “he has made me his own” says St Paul.

And verse 9 explains how; if all this depended on a righteousness of my own coming from my obedience to the

law, then all would be lost, too much; but this righteousness which is at the heart of this knowing, is not dependent on my righteousness but his. The bestowing of righteousness on the unrighteous which is at the heart of the gospel, is the gracious recognition of the reality that Christ Jesus has made me his own. You must go to Romans for Paul's full exploration and eloquence of this great theme, but here Paul sees Jesus like the Lord God in the garden of Eden, calling out to the man and the woman "Where are you?" because this knowing of Christ began for Paul when Jesus Christ found him, literally stopped him in his tracks, and began to make known his life to Paul by which he came to understand Christ's death. A suffering greater than we could ever know, an offering greater than we could ever give, a judgement greater than we could bear, a blessing greater than we could ever imagine, a giving of righteousness to the unrighteous, so that, as with St Paul, and so many since, as a young teenager, and right up to this moment, when I have felt utterly at the end of my resources, overwhelmed by personal failure and sin, I have found myself hearing again that still small voice coming to me and saying "Keith, get up, come on, I have made you my own"

Time has gone.

So, the two briefest of comments on inferences from this knowing;

1 Our identity: here in Philippians 3 we see how in our knowing Christ we come to know ourselves. The great paradox of taking up our cross, giving up our life to discover that we find it and are given back more than what we think we have lost. That is my testimony.

2 Our destiny: Here is St Paul in prison, unsure whether the next knock on the door is to be his executioner, and he is

talking about the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swedish diplomat and Gen Sec of the United Nations said

“Never look down to test the ground before taking your next step; only he who keeps his eye fixed on the far horizon will find the right road”.

His horizon is heaven, and St Paul has that destiny clearly in view, so that we could have it clearly in our view.

There is no time to say more about either inference, both full of significance for us personally and publicly.

Just this comment in closing; I've spoken in last few weeks of a sense of God calling us to a deeper evangelism in this new season, a deeper commitment and capacity to speak out the good news of God, as Paul did in the cities and culture of antiquity; as questions of identity and destiny arise for thousands of young and old as we emerge from the pandemic, we have no greater gift to anyone and everyone than to say that the truth of these words about knowing Christ are not marginal to our identity or destiny, as if we could somehow domesticate Jesus to our agenda, rather to say humbly and prayerfully our questions have not found their full answer until they have reckoned with the truth of these words, that it is possible to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering.

On 6th May 1979, 10 years after being baptised, I was confirmed, at All Souls Langham Place in London, that certificate is here too! At the end of this service, after hearing one of the other possible gospel readings set for today, there is a moment for us all to recommit, to reconfirm, the promises we made at our baptism when we came to Christ. Of course, it provides a moment too for us to ask if we might want to do that if we have not done so as yet.

As we hear these words from Philippians 3:10 please think about joining in that prayer, today, as I look back with you in thanksgiving, and as we step out into what is ahead, in trust.

“That I may know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering.”

Amen.