

Philippians 3:4-14 (NRSV)

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 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, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

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

What is it that you want to know more than anything else? Is it the contents of that parcel the postie asked you to take in for one of your neighbours? Is it the details of the latest government announcement about coronavirus? Or perhaps the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything. It can't be that because, ever since Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide* we know the answer is 42.

The apostle Paul knew exactly what he wanted to know above all else as he explained in his letter to the Philippians: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

Paul urges us to have the same ambition, and of course it is not as simple as the contents of a parcel, or hands/face/space, or even the number 42. Knowing Christ is a never-ending quest, but also one that gives purpose and power, the power of his resurrection.

Let's think for a while about what it means to know something. I was struck by an announcement this week from Kew Gardens about a race against time to discover and preserve new species of plants before they become extinct. Apparently two in five of the world's plant species are at risk, and the scientists at Kew are trying to discover and identify as many as possible before they disappear. It is quite a thought that there might be plant species disappearing even before discovery. Lost forever before ever being known – how sad is that?! Kew emphasise that among endangered plants are some that are medically important and may hold the key to cures for a pandemic. In Christian terms, we are throwing away the Creator's gifts before we have even looked to see what they are.

Knowing is more than just identifying and cataloguing something. A week ago on Friday, Drew Wager of the Ashford Astronomical Society gave a talk on the exploration of the planet Mars, including some amusing details about scientific discovery and misapprehension. For the early part of last century scientists wrote papers about the inhabitants of Mars and the supposed pattern of canals that had been built there. The lines that were interpreted to be canals built by an intelligent civilization may have been recorded due to faulty equipment or even the eye problems of a researcher. Early space probes were sent to the planet to look for supposed life on Mars. They sent back pictures that showed a planet obscured by dust clouds so the mystery remained. Now it is believed that Mars is the only planet in the universe inhabited by intelligent machines. We know that not because the creatures of H. G. Wells' imagination are real, but because of rover devices sent there by NASA. Mars demonstrates that knowing something is a developing task, and that great mysteries can take a long time to unravel, if they are ever fully known.

Knowing more about music was one of the aims of my sabbatical during lockdown. One online tutor suggested learning tunes literally backwards, a few bars at a time, and practising until muscle memory takes over without having to think what comes next. There are different ways of knowing. Knowledge can become so much a part of us that it is integral to everything we do and say. How wonderful if our knowing Christ becomes like that.

I think it was Newcastle University, who were lobbying last week for students to be let off 'A' levels in the coming year. It was argued that it is more important for students to learn than it is to jump through the examination hurdles – that learning is more important than assessment. They said that building up knowledge matters even more in a second year disrupted by Covid-19. What a radical and reassuring idea, that knowing is more important than being tested! In practices that would mean trusting teacher assessments of progress.

In the passage from Philippians we learn quite a lot about the apostle Paul, his prior knowledge and achievements. He describes his natural advantages and what he worked hard for in the early part of his life. He is a Hebrew of Hebrews, an expert Pharisee, who is from a favoured tribe and very zealous about advancing his own people, even to the extent that he persecuted Christians.

He retains his natural advantages, though he no longer saw them as such, but his life had been turned around by knowing Jesus, and what is more, knowing him to be the Messiah, the Christ, saviour of Jews and Gentiles.

Paul learned that knowing Christ was not about background and natural advantages, but about listening to God's word and receiving it as interpreted by the Holy Spirit. Like the universe God is too great to be fully known. Like the exploration of planets, sometimes God is shrouded in mystery and greater than we can fully know. Like the practice of music, knowledge of God is also about the patterns we follow in life – it is best when we know something with both heart and mind and perhaps in muscle memory too.

I was listening to someone last Wednesday who said they have used lockdown to read the Psalms and the Gospels. That is their way of progressing in knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ. By God's grace each of us need to find our own way, just as Paul worked out his own path to salvation. We cannot be exactly like each other in this because of our different backgrounds, interests and abilities.

I cannot prescribe for you exactly how to make progress in the faith, in part because that is something God works in us, and also because that may mean something different for you than for me. But we can all point each other to the importance of knowing Christ.

Paul gives us a hint as to why he is so full of zeal 'to know Christ and the power of the resurrection.' He says, 'Christ Jesus has made me his own.' His heavenly calling comes from this, that he has been claimed by Christ. Although Paul talks of working out his salvation, he doesn't mean that he gets there by his own efforts. God has planted in him the love of Christ, and that is the power-source at the heart of his life. Just as Jesus was raised to new life following the cross, so there is life and power for Paul and for us in Christ.

The lesser aims and advantages of life are still there, but they are eclipsed by this one goal of knowing God. That is something that not even coronavirus can take away. If these strange times give us more opportunity to think about what is important in life, then let us make this our priority, to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Amen.