

Phil 3:10-4:1
Knowing Christ
Tim Anderson 23/7/17

How long do you need to know a person before you really know them?
I've been married to Cherida for 20 years,
and I certainly know her better now than the day we got married.
But did I know her when we were married?
Well I certainly hope so.
It wasn't an arranged marriage.

Paul starts our reading with these quite surprising words.
"I want to know Christ."
But doesn't he already know him.
He had met Jesus on the road to Damascus 30 years before.
He had been living with Jesus as his Lord ever since.
He'd spent his life introducing other people to Jesus.
How can he say,
"I want to know Christ?"
Well he wants to know Christ,
in the sense that he wants to know Christ better.
Better and better every day.
So how do you get to know Christ better?

It's not like you can have a coffee with him -
sit down and chew the fat together.
Now I guess you might have an expectation
of the answer a minister would give to this question.
How do you get to know Christ better?
Every minister is going to tell you to read the Bible, aren't they?
I mean that's where the stories of Jesus' life can be found.
Well on many occasions I will encourage you to read the Bible.
But today that's not where Paul goes.
I want to know Christ -
yes, to know the power of his resurrection
and participation in his sufferings,

becoming like him in his death,
and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.
How do we get to know Christ?
The first way is to be a suffering Christian.
One way to get to know someone,
is to walk where they walked.
What would you do if you wanted to get to know Mother Theresa?
You can't meet her because she's died.
You could read a book about her.
But another way would be to visit the slums of Calcutta
where she cared for the poor.
Do what she did and experience her life.
Well it's the same with Jesus.
Do what he did and experience his life.
Did Jesus suffer?
Too right he did.
Not just in the last couple of days of his life either.
Jesus was constantly being mocked and bullied by the Pharisees.
He was described as a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.
Why did Jesus suffer so much?
Largely because he held up a mirror
that caused people to look at their own sin.
And if we walk where he walked,
we will suffer in the same way.
If you tell it like it is in our society,
then you will suffer.
And in years to come increasingly so.
But we can be assured that if we participate in his sufferings,
we also will participate in his resurrection.

How can we know Christ?
The next way is by having godly dissatisfaction.
In some ways we ought to be satisfied.
We should be content with where God has put us,
and with the gifts God has given us,
and with the people God has given us to love and care for.

There's no place for "I wish I could preach like Tim Keller."
God made Tim Keller to preach like Tim Keller.
But there is a godly discontent.
We don't want to be self satisfied.
You know the sort of people who think that they have arrived.
In our Christian lives, we have never arrived until Jesus returns.
Paul says,
"Not that I have already obtained all this,
or have already arrived at my goal."
Paul is adamant that he has not arrived.
He says,
"Brother and sisters,
I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it."
He hasn't got there yet.
Let's get this straight.
He is one of the pre-eminent leaders of world Christianity.
He is the great apostle to the Gentiles.
He's been doing that job for decades.
But he has not arrived.
How much more you and me.
We none of us have arrived.

But where have we not arrived?
We are certain of our salvation.
Back in 1:6 Paul said,
"He who began a good work in you
will carry it on to completion."
Paul is not unsure of his salvation.
But he knows that the perfection of heaven still awaits him.
Just because we are saved now,
doesn't mean we have our halos now.
I'm not a big fan of being called "the Reverend",
and I think titles like the Very Reverend,
and the Most Reverend are pompous.
They make it sound like the holder of the title has arrived.
But we none of us have arrived.

We are all in transit.

So we are suffering Christians,
following in Jesus' footsteps.

We are dissatisfied Christians.

Not dissatisfied with the gifts of the place God has put us.

But recognising that God still has work to do
as he transforms us into the likeness of Jesus.

Thirdly we are forgetful Christians.

As you get older,

you might be happy to know that Christians need to be forgetful.

At least I did remember to bring my sermon with me to church today.

Paul says,

"Forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead."

But what exactly should we forget?

We don't want to forget God's past blessings to us.

They are wonderful things to hold on to in tough times.

You get wonderful strength in your faith

when you remember what God has done for you over the years.

A bunch of the psalms are like that.

The psalmist rehearsing what God has done in the past
to help him trust today in a difficult situation.

But we do want to forget our achievements.

And we do want to forget our failures.

I used to play competition chess.

The thing I loved to hear my opponents talk about,

was the time they beat *insert big name player here*.

If they are talking about victories of long ago,

they are living in the past,

and will be a pushover in the present.

Focusing on past achievements means you are resting on your laurels.

If you are spending your time remembering the glory days,

then you don't have fire in your belly for the present.

That's just as true in the Christian life.

In the last few years of his life,

John Chapman could have told you
about the great gospel victories of his younger days.
But he didn't.
But he would tell you about the person in his retirement village
he was sharing the gospel with yesterday.
It's also good to forget our failures.
The memory of past failure can be paralysing.
The devil wants to strip away our confidence that we can live for Jesus.
What's done is done.
If it's been repented of and learned from,
then move on.
Jesus has already won the forgiveness.

Paul could have rested on his laurels.
He'd had plenty of victories.
But he was still straining towards what is ahead.
Paul could have been derailed by his failures.
He persecuted the church.
But he does neither.
He forgets what is past to serve Jesus now.

A suffering Christian.
A dissatisfied Christian.
A forgetful Christian.
Next a disciplined Christian.
It's the other half of forgetting what is behind.
You are straining towards what is ahead.
That means disciplined focus.

Paul is talking about winning the prize here.
And of course the great example of that is the Olympic gold medal.
Who could go past Usain Bolt.
Except of course Usain Bolt doesn't exhibit
the discipline Paul is describing.
It was the semi finals of the Olympic 100m.
Everyone else is straining towards what is ahead.

And Usain Bolt has got his head turned to the side.
Checking out the other runners to see how they are going.
It seems he's hardly in a sweat.
Usain Bolt is a perfect illustration
of what running the Christian race is not.
Bolt can cruise - particularly in the semis,
because he only has to do enough to beat the other runners.
But in our race the other runners are irrelevant.
Your Christian race is like a time trial.
It's just you against the clock.
What anyone else does has no bearing on your race.
Bolt gets the prize if he wins.
But in our race the prize is for finishing.
If you get to the end, you win.
In our race it takes discipline to finish.

Where do you most need discipline
to keep straining towards what is ahead?
Have you been discouraged by trying your heart out in the past
and things didn't work,
so you'd rather cruise now so you don't have to face disappointment?
Do you think that straining towards what is ahead is for young people
and now you are of senior years
you'd rather go at a gentle pace?
If you read Paul's letters,
you'll realise he faced disappointments aplenty -
churches he poured his heart and soul into turning against him
(Particularly the Corinthians)
and here he is still straining towards what is ahead
near the end of his life.

And it's not just for him.
He says,
"All of us who are mature should take such a view of things."
That means you too.
"And if on some point you think differently,

that too God will make clear to you."

You could think this is a bit smug.

You know.

"If you disagree with me on any point,
eventually God will reveal the truth to you, brother,
and you will come to agree with me."

But it's not that.

The point is that all of us have blind spots and inconsistencies
in our thinking as Christians.

Our minds are just as much affected by sin
as our desires and our actions.

But here's the promise.

If you are disciplined and working hard,
God will iron out the inconsistencies in your thinking.

Sometimes people say to me,
such and such a person hasn't got lots of book learning,
but she's been a Christian for such a long time,
that there will be much to gain from her experience.
Sometimes it's true and sometimes it's not.
Just having been a Christian for a long time
doesn't give you automatically lots of valuable insights.
But if you've been working hard and in a disciplined fashion,
forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead
for a long time -
well every person I meet like that had lots of valuable insights to offer.

Knowing Jesus -

so far we've had knowing Jesus by being a suffering Christian,
a dissatisfied Christian, a forgetful Christian and a disciplined Christian.
Finally, knowing Jesus by being a heavenly minded Christian.

Paul actually starts with the counter example.

What does it mean to fail to be heavenly minded?

It means having your God as your stomach.

The great Biblical example of this failing is Esau.

He sold his spiritual blessings for a bowl of soup.

Even Cherida's Tom Yum soup
is not worth selling your spiritual blessings for.
But there are people who live for the next gastronomic experience.
"Oh darling, the soufflé was to die for.
and the mousse was divine."
But of course Paul wasn't just talking about people
who have food as an idol.
Having your god as your stomach
is a way of talking about living for any sensory pleasure.
Some live for food.
Some live for exciting travel experiences.
Some live for their hobbies.
Some live for sex.
Some used to live for them, but these days they just live to reminisce
because they can't manage the actual experiences any more.

Now I have to say that there's a balance to be struck here.
All of these things are good gifts of God's creation.
As Paul says to Timothy.
"Everything God created is good,
and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."
Enjoy your chocolate mousse but don't live for it.
Where does enjoyment stop and living for something start?
Can you live without it?
If God took it away,
would you feel like your life was destroyed?
Can you prioritise serving Jesus
when there's an opportunity to do your favourite thing instead?
What makes you more excited,
seeing a brother or sister growing in their faith,
or your favourite sensory pleasure?
Everything God created is good,
but nothing God created is to be worshipped.
Our god is not to be our stomach.

Instead we are to be heavenly minded.

Paul says,
"Our citizenship is in heaven.
And we await a saviour from there,
the Lord Jesus Christ,
who by the power
that enables him to bring everything under his control,
will transform our lowly bodies
so that they will be like his glorious body."
The country where you are a citizen is your true home.
A couple of Australian politicians have fallen foul of this recently.
They've had to resign from parliament
because they were citizens of another country.
You represent the place you are a citizen of.
And if you're a Christian,
you are a citizen of heaven.
You live for the Lord of heaven, the Lord God Almighty.
And your mind is captivated by what he's going to do.
He's going to transform your body,
so that it will be like Jesus' body after his resurrection.
That's what should captivate our minds.
Don't fantasise about what you might look like
with the latest fashion clothes.
Fantasise about what you are going to look like
when Jesus gives you a perfect body.
I'd look better if I spent an hour a day down the gym,
but why get excited about that?
I'm going to look better still when I spend an eternity with God
in a resurrection body.

Today's passage is all about knowing Christ.
Paul says I want to know Christ.
How do we know him better?
By being a suffering Christian.
following in Jesus' footsteps.
Being a dissatisfied Christian.
You have not arrived.

There's always room for growth.
Being a forgetful Christian.
Neither resting on your laurels,
nor being paralysed by your failures.
Being a disciplined Christian.
Straining towards what is ahead.
No cruising, stretching yourself.
Being a heavenly minded Christian.
Rejecting living for sensory pleasures,
but instead living for the country we are citizens of.
And that is not Australia.
We are citizens of heaven.