

“Looking back, looking forward”

I worked for Meat & Livestock Australia for more than nineteen years, before I, with the whole department I was in, was made redundant in 2014.

Back in 2014, I was made redundant from an organisation I'd been employed by for more than nineteen years. Lots of things changed over those years, both for me and the organisation. Over that time, I accumulated a lot of knowledge very specific to the organisation. Phone numbers, accounting codes, contracting principles, computer procedures, people's names and roles, what decisions had been made and why and when and so on. But as of Thursday the 25th of September 2014, none of that really counted for much.

It was an odd situation – things that were so important to me for so long, were not so important any more. It was a matter of perspective.

And this is what St Paul is talking about in this today's reading from Philippians, it's about a perspective change. From the perspective of the world, to the perspective of a follower of Jesus. The things that were important to Paul before he came to know Jesus, ceased to be important.

We're not used to, as humans, getting reward without effort. You work hard, you get paid more. You do something courageous, you get a medal. You win a competition, you get a trophy. You do a good deed, you get thanked. But that's not how it works with God – we don't earn God's favour by working hard, or by doing good deeds, or by giving generously, or praying harder, or praising louder, or even by reading the bible more.

In fact, we don't earn God's favour at all; God's favour – his blessing, his salvation – is freely given to all that turn to him in faith. And it's given through Jesus Christ. Go back to basics: John 3:16, the most famous verse in the bible: “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not die but have eternal life”.

There's no earning involved: Turn to Jesus, and be saved. Put your faith in him. Put your hope in him. Put your future in him.

People will tell you other things from time to time. That you have to go to this particular church. Or you have a particular set of doctrinal beliefs. Or you have to be baptised by full immersion. Or you have to tithe ten percent of your income. They may be good things to do, but they are not what the scriptures tell us we need to be saved or to be “right with God”.

There are certainly people who will tell you that you need to obey the Ten Commandments to be saved – I know there's even an episode of the Simpsons where Bart Simpson's Sunday School teacher tells him that the way to avoid eternal punishment is to “obey these ten simple rules”.

But again, it's not obedience to the commandments which puts us right with God.

And in fact, if we start focusing on – or becoming preoccupied by - obedience and church attendance and good theology and regular prayer, then we can fall into the trap of thinking

that we can earn God's favour. If we can just pray a bit harder, or give a bit more, or come to church a bit more often, then God will think more highly of us, and he may just overlook our past failings.

But we can't do enough. We can't overcome all the bad things we have done by doing good things. Paul tells in his letter to the Romans that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (3:23, NIV), but he also assures us that "all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (3:24).

And, of course, in response to what God has done for us in Jesus, we often do those good things. By praying, by worshipping, by giving, by helping, by doing good deeds and by keeping the commandments and so on.

We often see the Commandments as part of the Old Covenant, that Jewish people were called to obey the commandments to be made right with God. But the commandments were given to the nation of Israel in the wilderness at Sinai after God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. The saving came first, and then the obedience to the commandments came as a response to that saving. And the Commandments had the effect of setting the nation of Israel apart from the other peoples of the world.

It remains a trap for us to think that we can earn God's favour, and it seems to have been a concern to the church in Philippi. They were a successful church, not struggling with many of the issues that the other churches that Paul wrote to were. No doubt they were exemplary Christians - but with that comes the danger of forgetting the grace they have received.

Paul sets them straight, and he does so by using himself as an example. "If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews". Effectively, he's saying "You think you're good? Well I'm better." And he goes on: "in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless." – so not only is he saying "my background's better than yours" but also "my actions are better than yours too".

It puts me in mind of that scene from Crocodile Dundee, when a New York gang member pulls his switchblade on Mick Dundee. Far from being threatened by the knife, Mick says "That's not a knife – this is a knife" and producing his own huge, crocodile skinning knife.

And I think we can read this passage and sort of nod along with Paul: I'd like to be like Paul. I'd like to know the scriptures well. I'd like to be pious. To be zealous. To get my doctrine right. To do the right thing. To be the model Christian – the one that others will look up to!

You may have even noticed it from time to time with people in the wider church – that sometimes people seem to be ticking things off a list to be "good Christians". A year as a Sunday school teacher. A term as an Elder. A cycle as a Synod delegate. And so on.

But then Paul brings that picture crashing down: "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."

So Paul effectively says “You think you’re good? Yeah, well I’m better. But even that doesn’t matter.”

It’s a bit like what’s happened to me when I left MLA – lots of knowledge I had about my old organisation was no longer of any use! My knowledge about MLA project numbers was not of use any more. My understanding of how the licensing systems work was worthless. But it’s not quite the same but it does nicely illustrate the point, though: Things that were important (were my working life forty plus hours a week) ceased to be important.

That’s what Paul tells us: All those good things he had; his background, his training, his zealotry, his piety are not worth anything in the face what Jesus has done for him. In fact, he says at the end of verse 8, that he now considers them garbage. Things to be thrown away, and very importantly, things not to be relied on. He can’t earn favour with God, but he has favour with God because of Jesus – therefore the trappings of his old life – work harder, pray harder, give more and so on are to be tossed away like garbage.

Instead, what is important is having faith in Christ. In gaining the righteousness that comes from faith.

And it’s not just Paul’s heritage and his claims to fame that change in the face of what Jesus has done, but it’s the whole world. Whatever the values of the world are: Wealth, security, fame, power, they don’t count for anything compared to the grace of God shown in Christ.

Having set out what’s not important, Paul goes on to explain what is, and it really is quite simple – he tells us in verse 10: “I want to know Christ” or in other translations “All I care for is to know Christ”. Paul, who had a personal experience of the risen Jesus, who had served faithfully, who had studied the scriptures, who had fellowship with an array of Christians for years, still says “I want to know Christ” rather than “I know Christ”. And so it should be with us – no matter how long we’ve been Christians, how many times we’ve attended church or Sunday School, or how many bible study groups we’ve been in, there is always more to know of Christ – to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

And the way to know Christ more, says Paul, is to know the power of his resurrection and to participate in his sufferings. And these things are really two sides to one coin. While the love of God for his creation is shown in the death of Christ (Rom 5:8), his power is shown in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. And that power allows us to grow as Christians, through the Holy Spirit acting in our lives.

It is not all easy for us though, because we live in a fallen world that will not be made perfect until Christ’s return in glory, and while we look forward to the day that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:11), that is our future hope. A sure and certain hope, but also very much a future one.

But if we want to be like Christ – and we should – then Paul tells us we must also share in his sufferings. And it is a daunting prospect, but we do have the hope of Jesus, and we do have the resurrection of Jesus to comfort us in whatever we face. Without death, there can be no resurrection. Without Jesus dying, he couldn’t have been resurrected. And similarly, without us dying to sin, dying to the ways of the world, we can’t be raised to life in Christ.

In verse 12 he says, “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.”

Paul hadn't reached perfection. He might have been striving to be like Jesus, but even he wasn't. But he pressed on, despite hardship, despite imprisonment, despite being in fear for his life, he held on to the hope that Jesus had given him.

He didn't hold himself out as the ideal Christian who the Philippians should model themselves on – after all at the opening of this reading he'd pointed out the error in relying on his background or what he had done. Instead, he points to Jesus and the hope that Jesus' death and resurrection had given to Paul – and to all people who turn to him in faith.

While the aim of our faith is not to “be like” Paul, we should follow his example, and the examples of faithful Christians throughout the ages as well.

We need to put aside the past – our past – and the ways of the world.

We need to guard against thinking that we can earn our way into God's good books, because of who we are or where we worship, or by doing things, by accumulating knowledge and achievements, no matter how good, or useful or generous or charitable they are.

And we need to guard against thinking that we can earn our way into God's good books by simply being obedient, by following the commandments.

That is not to say that those are bad things: recognising our heritage, doing good works and keeping God's commands – they are good things. And they are things that Christians should do, have done and continue to do in joyful gratitude for what God has done in Jesus.

Salvation – the sure and certain hope for the future – comes by the grace of God through Christ and only through Christ. Not because of who we are or what we have done, but through the grace of God.

We need to follow Paul's example, as he told the Philippians: Forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead, press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Amen