

Reflection

Alan Harper, Sunday 7th April 2019
Narromine Uniting Church

Philippian 3:4b-14

I used to know an Anglican minister. I won't tell you his name. I would have thought the chances of any of you knowing him were close to zero, until I happened to bump into him in Narromine a couple of years ago. Who'd have thought! But he'll remain nameless. But I remember him telling us one day how, as a young clergyman in a Sydney suburb, he had stood outside the local railway station in the evening peak hour, watching the hordes of people leaving the station on their way home, and thought to himself, "Most of them are going to go to hell."

It made me very uncomfortable at the time, and it still does today. I don't know how we might conceive of hell, but it wasn't that bit that so disturbed me. What troubled me was the *assumption* that *he* wasn't one of those destined to hell. I said "*assumption*", and that's correct, but it was also a *presumption*, a kind of self-satisfied arrogance that *he*, unlike they, had his salvation in the bag.

You do meet people like that. And, in a way, they are simply expressing their faith; they have believed the gospel, they have invested their faith in Jesus Christ, and they have experienced God's forgiveness. They may tell you that they've been "born again". So they talk confidently about when they "get to heaven", or when they meet their Lord face-to-face, or however they understand the next life. They by no means intend to be arrogant, or presumptuous; they *are* simply expressing their faith. Or at least many of them are.

But our passage today from Paul's letter to the Philippians offers a very great caution to such confidence, no matter on what it's based, Philippi was in northern Greece, in Macedonia to be precise. The church there had been founded by Paul, and he continued in close contact with it. The letter to the Philippians was written from prison, when Paul was in Rome, awaiting trial before the Emperor. The warm relationship between Paul and the Philippian Christians is very clear.

In chapter 3, Paul seeks to warn the people of the Philippian church about the danger posed by some Jewish Christians, who preached a gospel substantially different from the one Paul had brought to them. We read about Paul's battle with this "alternative" gospel throughout his letters, and of course in the book of Acts.

We really only know about the alternative gospel from what Paul has to say about it. It's probably very unfair to judge someone's teaching by what their opponent had to say about it. But as best we can understand it, these Jewish Christians taught that conversion to Christianity must involve adoption of the Jewish Law. The matter that comes up most often is circumcision: circumcision was an outward sign in men of their Jewishness. Neither

Romans nor Greeks were ever circumcised, and in fact regarded it as a barbaric practice, in much the same way that we regard so-called “female circumcision” as barbaric.

But circumcision was just a symbol of the much larger body of Jewish law: there was far more to the Law than this outward sign of adherence. Observance of the Sabbath was one very obvious requirement of the law; the Graeco-Roman world had no concept at all of a seven day week, and the Jewish custom of taking the seventh day off each week was regarded as peculiar, and as a sign of laziness. There wasn't really anything else in the Ten Commandments with which Paul would have taken issue; they accorded with Christian teaching and Christian morality; but in the Judah of that day, the law was about far more than just the Ten Commandments. In fact, the scribes were agreed that there were 613 commandments deriving from the Torah. Very few of them were as central to moral living as the commandments not to commit murder or adultery or theft! They covered all kinds of things, such as, for example, the command not to plant two different crops in the same field, and the one not to make a garment from two different kinds of fibre. You'll know from the gospels how the Pharisees had sought to interpret these hundreds of commandments for a new age, and in doing so, had created a whole new, even bigger, body of law. Jesus often found himself in dispute with Pharisees about how they viewed the Law, as you'll know only too well.

Yet it was *this* incredible body of law which some Jewish Christians were demanding that Gentile converts to Christianity adopt and obey.

Paul recognised and called out the grave danger of such teaching. We tend to concentrate on the theology of it: as inheritors of the Reformation, most of us would go to the wall to defend the doctrine of salvation through faith alone.

But, while Paul would certainly agree, he was more practical about the problem that requiring obedience to the law posed. First and foremost, it virtually eliminated Jesus from the equation. If salvation was all about obeying a set of rules, then what was the place of the crucified and risen Christ? Rigid adherence to the law encouraged people to believe that this would secure their salvation. I've done everything God requires, so he's pleased with me, and I'm done! I've earned this prize myself by being so strict in how I behave. I don't really need Christ, because I'm so obedient and meticulous.

So in the early part of the passage, Paul uses the language of an accountant to present a kind of “balance sheet”. If anyone could be confident in their Jewishness, he says, it was Paul himself. Paul had been circumcised on the eighth day after birth, as the Law required; he was from the tribe of Benjamin, which means that he was confident in his ancestry right back to the time of the patriarchs; he describes himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews”, which most probably means that, unlike those Jews who spoke Greek, or even Aramaic, and even though he had been born in the Greek city of Tarsus, he spoke Hebrew; he is, “in regard to the law, a Pharisee”, he says, thus, one steeped in and devoted to the law, and insistent on its detailed application; and as for “zeal”, Paul reminds the Philippians of how he had zealously persecuted the church. In summary, he says, *as for legalistic righteousness [I am]*

faultless.

He has all these things on the “credit” side of his balance sheet, he says. In other words, if being Jewish and acting Jewish and obeying the Jewish law were all that were required for salvation, he, Paul, is ahead of just about anyone else. *If anyone thinks that he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, he says, I have more.*

But there is no confidence in such things, there is no credit in such things, there is no salvation in such things. Paul tosses all these apparent “credits” onto the “debit” side of the balance sheet.

But whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss. What is more, I consider everything a loss

compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord....

And he goes on,

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

There could be no more powerful rejection of any doctrine that taught that salvation could be earned through the law.

Now we have certainly not been brought up in a tradition which demands that we obey the Jewish Law; nor do we face the danger of Christians of a different persuasion coming to town to preach such a gospel to us. Nevertheless, we’d all be aware that there are churches, and there are congregations, which place enormous emphasis on their members obeying a set of strict rules. How many churches, for example, require strict abstinence from alcohol: if you want to be one of us, you can’t have a drink. You’ve probably encountered churches that have an unspoken – or even an explicit – dress code, though that’s not as common as it once was. But there were certainly times when men daren’t turn up without a tie, and maybe a coat, when women daren’t come without their head covered; when a man with long hair would be surreptitiously sent packing. If you want to be one of us, you can’t look like that.

I’m sure you could add to the list, but I’m sure also that you can see the point: even though we may not face the same heresy that Paul was fighting against, we’re pretty good at inventing our own heresies, which place keeping a set of rules at the centre of Christian life, and so tend to dislodge the Lord Jesus Christ from that central position. Let’s heed the warning: not only is that *not* what Christian faith is all about; not only will any set of rules never lead to salvation; but – as Paul points out often – we are, in any case, incapable of perfect obedience to *any* set of rules. If we place such value on rules, the rules themselves, ultimately, condemn us. We’ve set our own standards then prove that we can’t achieve them. Only the risen Christ can save us. Only the risen Christ. That is why Paul gladly ditches all his worldly credits for the one and only credit that matters – faith in the risen Lord.

But even for those of us who get that; even for those of us who eschew any notion that there is eternal value in laws and rules and codes of conduct; even for those of us who acknowledge our complete and utter dependence on Christ – even for us, there is a warning in this passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It’s a stern warning that my minister friend should have heeded, all those years ago, and should be heeded by all those who confidently assert that their salvation is secured.

Because Paul himself – Paul himself, the great apostle, the master theologian, the humble servant of Christ who sacrificed all for his faith, who was gaoled, beaten, mobbed, run out of town, betrayed and denounced – even Paul himself had no such confidence. Even Paul would not assert that his salvation was “in the bag”.

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. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

The analogy has changed. Paul is no longer using the language of an accountant, but of an athlete, a marathon runner. You may recall the similar passage in I Corinthians, in which Paul talks about running the race to win the crown. Here his eye is always ahead of him; he never looks back. His concentration is on the prize. Everything he does is towards that one goal. He is confident that the prize is there, that it can be achieved; but he is not confident that he has yet got there. The race is still going, and it will only be over when it’s over.

I don’t know if a modern-day Paul would have stood outside a railway station, mentally consigning hundreds of people to hell. Perhaps he would. But I am confident that he would never have smugly assumed that he was not one of them. Paul is not so presumptuous. He knows that the race must be run until the day that he dies, that there can be no complacency, no easing off, no self-satisfaction, no self-congratulation. His faith in Christ demands action, action every day and every minute. The race is not over until it’s over.

Were we to project Paul’s analogy of the balance sheet into this situation, Paul would have a great many more credits than any of us, I would guess. Certainly than me! Paul’s faith and his consistency and his resilience surely dwarf mine. If Paul could not be sure of his salvation, how much less can we be, can I be? But like Paul, we surely will jettison all the things we count as credits, in exchange for the one overwhelming credit that is Christ Jesus; and like Paul, we are called to keep running the race, steadfastly heading for the one goal that matters, until the day when the goal becomes a reality, and we are united with Christ and our race is won.

It’s always good to remind ourselves, that in Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, there were many surprised people. Many of those who received Jesus’ approbation had no idea how this had happened; but many of those who were expecting to be so approved were bitterly disappointed, even indignant. Certainly, they were mystified. How could this

be? They had every expectation that their salvation was assured. What could have gone wrong?

But Jesus warned us: Don't judge others, lest you yourselves be judged. Paul did not fall into that trap; and Paul's words are a warning to us too. At this halfway point through Lent, a time for repentance, we do well to be reminded that we are in a marathon, and that the tantalising prize is not yet won.

Amen