

2024-03-03 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Canon William Price  
Exodus 5:1 – 6:1; Philippians 3: 4 - 14

The phrase *'making bricks without straw'* comes from tonight's first lesson (Exodus, chapter 5 to chapter 6, verse 1). It means to be expected to do something without sufficient resources. Moses and Aaron asked Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, for permission for the Israelites in Egypt to go to a three-day feast to God in the wilderness. Pharaoh not only refused, calling the Israelites lazy people, but he ordered that they should continue to produce bricks in the same quantities as before, but now without straw. Let them scavenge for the straw. They were slaves, with no freedom at all. When the Israelite foremen saw Moses and Aaron they said to them: *'May God see what you've done and judge you – you've made us stink before Pharaoh and his servants.'* Moses himself was worried at this development and asked God why he had sent him on what seemed a pointless mission to force Pharaoh to let the people go. But then God said to Moses that he would make Pharaoh drive the Israelites out of Egypt.

We might reflect on the Israelites' fury against Moses, although to be fair they were suffering as slaves and their suffering was getting worse. Or we might reflect how even Moses faltered in his mission before receiving further strength from God to carry on. We might consider our fears and doubts sometimes about how and where life is taking us.

There is much more spiritual sustenance in our second lesson this evening (Philippians, chapter 3, verse 3b to 14). St Paul is writing to the Christians in the city of Philippi in Greece, a city which no longer exists. In about 50 AD Paul had founded the church in Philippi. He wrote this letter probably in 62 AD when he was in prison in Rome awaiting his trial before the Emperor. It is clear that there were some people in Philippi who were urging Christians to be obedient to the Jewish Law. These were probably Christians who had joined the church while retaining Jewish views on the law. They insisted on circumcision and keeping the Jewish Law as an essential part of being a Christian.

Paul would have none of this. So he lists his inherited Jewish privileges to show that he is a real Jew. He was circumcised on the eighth day, he was of the people of Israel, he was of the tribe of Benjamin, he was a Hebrew born of Hebrews, the son of parents who spoke Aramaic, a form of Hebrew. He was as much a Jew as I am a Welshman! Then he lists his Jewish attainments. He had been a Pharisee, belonging to the strictest sect in Jewry, a brotherhood which tried, from the highest of motives, to keep the Jewish Law in every detail. Paul had been a persecutor of the Christian church. We remember that he was on his way to Damascus to stamp out the Christian church there when he was converted to follow Jesus. He had been blameless, at least from the Pharisaic standpoint, in keeping the Jewish Law. In short he had been the perfect Jew. Those who wanted to impose the Jewish Law on Christians should be in no doubt about his former commitment to the Jewish Law.

But since he had met Jesus on the Damascus Road he counted his former Jewish life as a Pharisee as useless, a dead loss. He now knew Jesus whom he called *'Christ Jesus my Lord'*. He had *'suffered the loss of all things'* in following Jesus. He regretted nothing. What mattered was that he had *'gained Christ'*. He was united to Christ by the closest of bonds. He was no longer righteous because he was obeying the Jewish Law. He was righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the teaching of justification by faith, the very basis of Christian belief.

This is being right with God. How do we get right with God? There is a choice of ways. There can be law-righteousness or there can be faith-righteousness. Paul had tried law-righteousness. As a Pharisee he had believed that by doing all the works prescribed by the law of Moses he could put himself right with God and find peace. But he had found that that led to despair and failure. And then he met Jesus and found the true answer. This is basic Christianity. We can't earn our salvation by trying to get a credit balance in God's ledger. No, the only way to find salvation is to confess that we are **PTO**

sinner and throw ourselves on God's mercy offered by Jesus. Then God accepts us, forgives us, and we are on the way to salvation. Before we can **'rise with Christ'**, in Paul's words, into newness of life we must die to sin, and then the ultimate experience is to share with Christ in the resurrection of the dead.

At the end of tonight's lesson Paul admits that he is not yet perfect, but still he presses on, reaching out to Jesus as Jesus reached out for him. As one paraphrase puts it in Paul's words: ***'I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward – to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back...Now that we're on the right track'***.

It is significant that Paul speaks about forgetting what lies behind when he talks about straining forward. He must refer to his past achievements in the Christian life, or perhaps to his life before he became a Christian. But the secret of Christian progress is to forget one's past accomplishments, and to go on to new ones. A runner does not look backwards. Always push on towards the prize, final Christian perfection and its heavenly rewards. Always striving forward.

Talk of striving and running might be enough to exhaust us! There might be times in our Christian pilgrimage when we feel tired and wonder if it's worth all the striving. I remember a Vicar from Swansea preaching in the College Chapel in Lampeter when I was a lecturer there. He talked about a woman in his church who had been very heavily involved in everything – PCC, churchwarden, flower-guild organiser, treasurer. Then she suddenly stopped coming to church at all. The Vicar went to see her to ask why she left the church, and she just said 'What's the point'? Perhaps you have felt like that.

One might answer that serving the church is only worthwhile if it is seen as a way to serve Jesus. The Church has many failings, which is not surprising because it is run, as it were, by human beings with all our failings. But I believe that the Church is the best way for most of us to get to know Jesus, that Jesus whom St Paul in this letter to the Philippians calls ***'our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ'***.

I pray that this church with your new Rector will continue to move forward in love for Jesus and, with God's grace, bring others to share in the glorious inheritance of the saints in light.

To God be the glory.

William Price