

“PEOPLE OF POWER – LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF EASTER”
Philippians 3:1-10

“I’m building a people of power”, we have just sung. And earlier we read from *Philippians 3:10*, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” It’s what we want to be, isn’t it? – A People of Power, people whose lives are inspired by and demonstrate the resurrection power of the risen Christ. We claim to be the followers of a Christ who is victorious, triumphant; the Christ who burst from the empty tomb and showed that nothing – neither sin nor death nor hell – could overcome him. He is the greatest, the Champion, the Easter Christ. And we are his Easter people.

His life demonstrated that he was powerful – he healed people, he drove demons from people, he faced up to the enormous power of the traditional religious establishment and he stood against the military and economic might of Rome. His teaching demonstrated that he was powerful – he attracted huge crowds, spoke with authority, commissioned and commanded. Even when they came to arrest him, he took control of the situation. In the hour of his apparent failure, he was still calling the shots. And we are his followers, his people, people of power.

So why, then, do we seem so weak and ineffectual? Why is the Christian church marginalised and ignored? Why are we so ineffective at touching this community? In whichever direction you turn at the moment, there are long laments about the decline of the church. Surveys and statistics and analyses all point to a great diminution in numbers attending church and in numbers who even *know* anything about the Gospel, let alone take it seriously. Almost every session I attended at *Spring Harvest* began with or included somewhere a period of hand-wringing and breast-beating about the parlous state of the Church in the West. I’ve spent the last week in Edinburgh being harangued by Americans telling us yet again that the church is on its last legs in the culture of the West. Why? Why is this happening?

Why are we not the People of Power, the people of Christ who live in the light of Easter? That’s what we want to be, isn’t it? We want to be people who make a difference. We want to be people who can use the amazing power of the Holy Spirit that the Risen Christ gave us as his gift. We want to be an effective and influential church at the heart of this city. We want, as Paul says here, “to know the power of his resurrection.” That is the case, isn’t it? If not, I’m wasting my time.

So why don’t we appear to “know the power of his resurrection”? Well, it’s part of a package, according to Paul. “The power of his resurrection” is not a bolt-on option that you can simply take and fix to the life you already have: you have to re-arrange your life completely with this power as a part of the new, re-furnished whole. Even Jesus could not just have the power of resurrection on its own. Resurrection necessarily implies being resurrected **from** something. There is now resurrection without death, without sacrifice. And that had to come first.

Paul could not simply attach the power of Christ’s resurrection to what was already, by most measures, a very powerful life – at least in the eyes of his culture. He had had to discard all that stuff. Look at what he writes in *v3* – “we put no confidence in the flesh”. It’s a bit of a troublesome word, “flesh”. The Greek word, for what it’s worth, is *sarx*. It has all kinds of implications bound up in it, but basically (the way Paul uses it) it boils down to meaning everything that is human but not of God – selfishness, a desire to satisfy our various enthusiasms and appetites in ways which are inimical to the ways of Christ. Paul had good cause to put confidence in the *sarx*, from a purely cultural perspective. In *vv4-6* he writes of the awesome reputation he had in traditional religious circles. He was, as he says in the last word of *v6*, “*faultless*”. And that is no idle boast – he was (as far as human judgement was concerned)!

He went further than a repudiation of his religious heritage, though. He encompassed everything in his life when he wrote this: learning, material possessions, status, the lot. You have only to read through parts of his other letters, particularly the second letter he wrote to Corinth (2 *Corinthians 11:21ff*) to see

that Paul had rejected all these things as a source of power. In v8 he speaks plainly – and, we might think, coarsely – of his opinion of all that. He “*considers them rubbish*”. As we’ve said before, that is a pretty strong word in Greek – skubala. If I were to say that the English phrase “*I consider it all a load of crap*” is actually a more refined way of translating what Paul wrote than the literal translation, you get the drift, I hope! He was not interested at all in these things. He wanted to know the power of Christ’s resurrection, but as part of the package.

Look at v10 with me, if you have a Bible handy. The package has three elements, and I would suggest that Paul is saying you can’t have one without the other. If you want to know the power of the resurrection, if you want to be an Easter Christian, to make a difference, to have an influence for good, to enjoy the assurance and the joy and the peace of living with your eye on eternity, then you also have to “*know Christ*” and “*know the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings*”.

1. TO KNOW CHRIST

What’s top of the list of Paul’s priorities? – To “*know Christ*”. It’s there in all his letters, in all his preaching. That’s why he considers everything else, **everything**, skubala. That’s why he writes to the Corinthians, “*I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Christ*”. He has a single-minded approach to life – Jesus Christ is his focus and always will be. Anything and everything else is subservient to his desire to get closer to Christ, to become more intimate with him and more united to him. There are no other priorities in his life. There is one item on the agenda and this is it.

Now, this isn’t to do with knowing *about* Christ. It’s not just about intellectual assent, about head knowledge, about accumulating facts and figures, putting together a photo album or a scrap book, about reading the Bible to pass exams or to compare it with other great works of literature. It’s not about PhD’s and statements of faith. It’s about becoming intimately acquainted with him. Sorry to bang on about the Greek again, but some of you like to know that the minister’s actually put some thought into this. The Greek word here is ginoskein. It’s the word that is used in the Greek translations of the Old Testament to translate the Hebrew word “*yada*”, the word used in so many places in the Old Testament to refer to a man “*knowing*” his wife.

Now, when I was considering marrying Sally, I could have read about her, asked other people about her, looked at photos of her, read letters from her, filled my head with all kinds of stuff *about* her – all of which would, no doubt, have been interesting and demonstrated just what a wonderful woman she is. I would have known *about* her. But I wanted to have fun with her – and still do – so I need to know her a little more intimately. And that makes a great deal of difference – a heck of a lot more fun than just reading about her!

So we’re talking here about **intimacy with Christ**, about getting to know him personally, about living your life with him at the very centre. Yes, you can read about him in the gospels – and you need to keep doing that: it’s necessary too. You need to talk with him and listen to him, in prayer and reflection. You need to put him at the top of your list of priorities. **You** do. There’s a great bit at the end of John’s gospel, which I’ve read goodness knows how many times, but this Easter it seemed to come at me with renewed force. In *John 21:20ff*, Jesus is strolling along the shore with Peter, whom he has just forgiven and commissioned. Jesus is telling Peter about all the great things in store for him as a Person of Power, an Easter Christian who will lead and inspire other – great things, such as how he is going to die. Peter looks round and sees John walking along with the others and says to Jesus, “*What about him, then?*” What’s in store for John? What’s Jesus got to say about him? Jesus says to Peter, “That’s no business of yours. You’re the one I’m asking to follow me at the moment” Don’t worry about other people and their walk – either to become jealous of them or to become judgemental. This is for you. Are you listening?

But we're also talking about **inspiration by Christ**. If you get to know him intimately, you'll be inspired. That's what happens in our ordinary lives, isn't it? Getting to know some people better, more intimately, can be inspiring. I've mentioned her once, so I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb: it's Sally that inspires me. If it wasn't for her, I probably wouldn't be here. But it's Christ who inspires me even more – and without him, I wouldn't be anywhere. Knowing Jesus – “*there is no greater thing. He's my all, he's the best, he's my joy, my righteousness.*” He kept Paul going. He keeps me going. Get to know him. Commit yourself fully to him.

But it's not just **intimacy** and **inspiration** that we're after. You want to know “*the power of his resurrection*” – well, knowing that, and knowing Christ means **identification** with him. And that doesn't mean simply standing up and proclaiming your allegiance to him – it means a whole lot more than that. If you want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, then you've also got to “*know the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings*”.

2. TO KNOW THE FELLOWSHIP OF SHARING IN HIS SUFFERINGS

You're going to need a big gulp of air now, because this is tough stuff. We've already said that for Jesus there is no resurrection without death, without sacrifice. If you're wanting to stride along the path of resurrection power, you've got no alternative but to crawl along the path of sacrificial suffering first. R P Martin, the great New Testament scholar, wrote “*costly discipleship is the road by which Christians come to know who Jesus is and follow him.*” Now, let's get one thing straight here to start with. Paul is not writing here about suffering, but about sacrifice. This is not about the ways in which being a Christian helps to deal with the suffering you and I experience simply because we're human. Everyone has to go through that some time or other – it's just that for Christians, Jesus can bring a bit of help. No, this isn't about suffering *because you're a human* in a fallen world, it's about suffering *because you're a Christian* in a hostile world. This is about the sacrifices you have to make by virtue of the fact that you are a follower of Jesus Christ, as a consequence of the decision you have taken to get to know Jesus more intimately.

David Coffey, in his Bible studies at *Spring Harvest* the week before last, asked more than once, “*Does following Christ actually cost you anything?*” Those who were there saw harrowing footage of Christians in other parts of the world for whom the answer to that question was “Yes”: it cost them their jobs, their homes, their families, their limbs, their churches, their lives. Does it cost **you** anything? Not really, for most of us. It probably costs little more than our membership of the gym or the golf club. It probably costs less than our foreign holidays and our restaurant bills. It doesn't cost us anything in terms of status, or health, or comfort, or career prospects. Also at *Spring Harvest*, Alistair Brown, the director of *BMS World Mission* came out with this memorable phrase: “*There is no such thing as discount discipleship.*” It's got to cost something – in fact, it's got to cost everything. We need to give ourselves over wholly to God – heart, mind, body, bank account, diary, energy: the lot!

We spoke in passing earlier on about the haemorrhaging of people from the churches in our nation (and, indeed, the rest of the Western world). Why are people leaving church? Why do people want nothing to do with church? Why do people complain about the church? George Barna, the American pollster, asked a huge number of churchgoers what they thought the church was there for. 20% said it existed to reach out to the world. 80% said the church exists to meet their needs. (Interestingly, in the same survey, ministers said exactly the opposite.) So, if the church doesn't do what **I** want, if it doesn't meet **my** felt needs, then I'm off. It's here for me.

Now that is a pretty good reflection of the spirit of the age in which we live. BBC2 has been showing a documentary series on Sunday evenings entitled *The Century of the Self*, dealing with the ways in which the theories of Freud and his many and varied successors in the world of psychology and therapy have made an impact on the way we live our lives. The title sums it up, doesn't it? We live in a culture of

“Me, me, me!” There’s no concept of sacrifice, of suffering – either sacrifice for Christ or for others. Give me that resurrection power so that I can experience it and demonstrate it in the way I rise to the top of the heap in this self-obsessed society, but don’t talk to me about sacrifice.

That’s why we all blame the Church for losing members – because we don’t see ourselves as a part of it. We come along here as we might go to the theatre, many of us. An hour of entertainment and conscience salving on a Sunday. And so we can say, because we don’t see ourselves as a part of it, we don’t see ourselves as making any sacrifice for it, “The church doesn’t meet my needs” or “The church doesn’t care about me.” Well, as Paul might say, “That’s complete load of skuba la” (Pardon my Greek!).

What does it actually *cost* you to be a Christian? Where does the concept of sharing in the sufferings of Christ fit into your view of discipleship? What do you need to give up for Christ as you get to know him more intimately? Self-centredness and selfishness? Power? Comfort? Money? In a place like Lichfield, that last one is probably where the rubber hits the road. It’s often been observed that the last part of a person to be committed to Christ is their wallet. Denis Healey, when he was Chancellor, famously threatened to “*squeeze the rich until the pips squeak*”. Of course, he didn’t. But do your pips ever squeak for Christ?

We want the church to make a difference. We want a church at the heart of the city that subverts this culture, that influences the decision makers for justice and righteousness, that reaches out to this community. We want a church that is involved in mission around the world. We want to see that resurrection power at work. But we don’t want to pay for it – that’s the bottom line. If we believe in the vision God has given us for this church at the heart of this city – and if we don’t, we should never, ever have voted for it – then we need to find the resources. I actually believe that, if we were serious about this project, and if we took seriously our commitment to put Christ at the top of our agenda, the money for the redevelopment project could be raised from within this congregation by the end of the year. You will probably howl with apparent disbelief at that statement, but I suspect the howl would really be pain. That’s when sacrifice starts to mean something.

I’ve been away at a conference for preachers this last week – and I’ve heard some powerful preaching (and a fair bit of stuff that might qualify for another of Paul’s Greek words!). The final sermon on Thursday evening – an hour long and starting at 9.30pm – was by Revd Dr William Augustus Jones Jr, pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn for over 40 years. He had the kind of voice that made Barry White sound like a falsetto, and a delivery that was better than anything I’ve ever heard at Stratford. He closed his sermon by talking about Jesus and the question of what we give to whom, which Jesus answered by referring to the coin. And his last words, which he delivered as he actually left the platform, the last words of the Congress, were, “*When you give to God what is truly his, there ain’t much left for Caesar!*”.

In sharing in the suffering of Christ, in knowing what sacrifice is actually all about (and doing it), then you’re sharing in Christ’s work. And, as William Barclay writes in his comments on this passage, “*it is not a penalty, but a privilege to share in Christ’s work.*” I’d echo that from the core of my being. I say this without any chip on my shoulder and in all humility – I’ve given up a great deal to follow Christ where he’s led me so far: and it’s the greatest thing I’ve ever done.

3. TO KNOW THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION

So let’s go back to where we started. When we start to get to know Christ – when we have that sense of intimacy, when we are driven by his inspiration, when we have pledged ourselves to identify with him, especially in his sacrifice and suffering – then, and only then, we will start to know in our own experience his resurrection power. After Jesus had suffered and died, after he had given absolutely everything in sacrifice on the cross of Golgotha, after he had been emptied of even his breath – and he gave it all for

you, so that you could know the security of a renewed relationship with God – then and only then, he returned to live with resurrection power.

After you have given everything over to Christ, after you have committed yourself to put Jesus at the very top of your list of priorities – on his own, not sharing top spot with anyone or anything else – then and only then will you start to experience all that he has for you, only then will we as a church start to experience all that he has for us. Then we will see resurrection power. Then we will no longer be afraid, beating our breast and bewailing the oft-heard prediction that the church will be extinct within a generation. Then we will be able to speak out with renewed confidence and renewed authority. Can you imagine the effect it would have on this community if this place was wholly financed by this congregation within a year? It would be obvious then that we believed in it and in everything that lies behind it.

To know the power of Christ's resurrection means a guarantee of a life to come with Christ, so nothing, not even death, can scare us. I have heard so many stories over the past fortnight that I can't remember where they all came from, but I'm sure someone will put me right after the service (after all, it's easier to correct my illustrations than ask me what to do about the meat of the message). A pastor living in a country where persecution was an everyday reality for him was visited by the secret police. They explained that if he continued preaching they would arrest him. "And then?" he replied. They would take him to the police station. "And then?" They would put him in solitary confinement. "And then?" They would beat him up. "And then?" They would torture him. "And then?" "We have it in our power to kill you." "And then?" Resurrection power – but only after the realisation that sacrifice is necessary.

And not only does that resurrection power mean the guarantee of a life to come, the end to fear of death, it means the presence of Christ now, according to his promises. A Christ who could keep his promise to walk through death and out the other side can be trusted to keep his promises about anything, I reckon. He will be with us here and now, supporting us, motivating us, loving us, leading us. When you've sacrificed everything, all your supports and buttresses are gone, then you have to be radically dependent on Jesus. If you've declared your willingness to give it all up for him, then there's really nowhere else to turn. You'll see a difference – and, more to the point, others will see a difference. That's when life gets really exciting. That's when you start to appreciate what it really means to follow Christ. I want to have more of that resurrection power – how about you?