

“BACK TO WORK”
1 Corinthians 15:58

Well, we've recommissioned our Youth & Children's Work Team. Things are starting to get back to normal. As we said last week, although for many of us school and college are not really part of our everyday experience, it seems as if our body calendars are somehow programmed to keep to the academic year. Things gear up at work. Sports seasons get going once more. The various activities of the church which have been dormant over the summer start up again. It's time for re-starts, new sessions.

And that very often means pep talks, calls to re-focus our vision, time for inspiration and motivation. Even if we can't understand all the jargon, we still catch something of the passion and the fervour. Paul Whitehouse did a sketch last week in which he came in as the manager of a multi-racial football team – probably Chelsea – and gave them a real good talking to, then went round to each player individually and gave him a pep talk in his own language. Even though most of the words were incomprehensible to the viewer, there was no doubting the commitment that he wanted from his players.

And as we get going again with our new programmes, re-starting our home groups and looking for new opportunities, we look to Paul's words in *1 Corinthians 15:58*. He was someone who was continually trying to motivate Christians in the various churches and Christian communities around the Mediterranean. They were people who faced many of the same problems that we do, but on top of that there was, for many of them, a real threat of persecution. Many of these relatively new Christians were struggling as they tried to put into action the faith that they had recently taken on. Now, as I say, we may not be in quite such a perilous position as they were, but we still need to hear these words today, because often we find our very comfort is the barrier to our getting on and living our lives as Jesus calls us to. Let's see what Paul has to say.

“STAND FIRM. LET NOTHING MOVE YOU.”

As Dudley was reminding us at the Elders' Meeting on Monday, many of these verbs in the New Testament are written in the *present continuous* tense. In other words, they should really be translated as “keep on ...” This is something we should always be trying to do. In other words, don't let yourselves be distracted from the task of communicating the Good News about Jesus. Do not allow other things to get in the way of what God asks you to do. We should keep Jesus at the very heart of all that we do – as our church vision states. If you watch the athletes at the Olympic Games – particularly the sprinters – as they wait for the starter's gun, you will see in their eyes a total focus on the finishing line. I will never forget

Lynford Christie's unblinking stare as he crouched ready for the off. Nothing was going to move him from his goal of winning that race.

Don't be put off by other ideas. Over the past couple of years there has been a plethora of books by such high-profile atheists as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins – as well as some by high-profile Christians such as Bishop Richard Holloway – which seem designed to knock the faithful off track. By all means think about your faith and consider carefully what it is that you believe, but don't allow others to undermine the faith that you have. Keep reading the Bible and talking with other Christians.

“ALWAYS GIVE YOURSELVES FULLY ...”

Once again – and more explicitly this time – there is that *present continuous* tense. It takes 100% effort to follow Jesus as he wants. He asks real commitment of us – in terms of time, energy, gifts, resources. There should be no slacking – it's like every member of a team giving their all for the good of the whole. And if one part gives up, then everyone is affected. The word “*labour*” here is a translation of two words in the Greek: “toil” and “work”. This can be very hard work if we take it seriously. God asks us to give everything for him, just as Jesus gave everything for us. We need to ask ourselves regularly – and this is as good a time as any to do that – if we are really committed to what God calls us to do.

It's not simply a question of activity. In fact, sometimes activity can be a way of avoiding what God does actually want us to do and to be. It's a question of focus, of determination, of wanting to do, to be, to give the very best for God. The trouble is, when we read words like these of Paul, when we hear a sermon such as this, it can seem so much empty hectoring. Some of you are probably already thinking this is just another harangue from the front again. Why are church leaders, from Paul to contemporary church leaders, always banging on about this commitment thing, about what we need to do for God? I will never forget a person at the church where I worked before coming here saying to me after one sermon, “You're always telling us **what** we should be doing, even telling us **how** to do it. You never tell us **why** we should be doing it!”

SO WHY?

Just standing here week by week doing that would be a waste of time. Paul, too, realised that there wasn't any point simply banging on about what the new Christians ought to be doing without some kind of reason for it. This isn't some kind of nihilistic or fatalistic “Well, it's better than nothing. We've got to

do something with our lives, so we might as well get on with this.” We’re not just working for the sake of it – if we weren’t doing this we’d be out digging the allotment or organising a community activity or pouring all our energy into some sporting endeavour, without any real lasting benefit.

And if we do bring faith into it, we’re not simply doing it because we serve an oppressive God who likes ordering us about. This isn’t work to get us into God’s good books, or to ensure that we stay there. There is some kind of point to it all. Paul says here that “*your labour in the Lord is not in vain*”. There is a purpose to it and you will be able to see what that purpose is. There is transformation involved and there are eternal issues to be considered.

You see, work that is “*in vain*”, that has no point to it, that is work just for the sake of it, is frustrating, soul-destroying stuff. Look at the cartoons by Scott Adams of *Dilbert* the hard-pressed computer engineer who can never see any real point to what he’s doing. Or think about the tactic used by both the Germans and the Japanese during the war to break prisoners – getting them to do work that was completely pointless: digging holes and then filling them in again. Working for the good of the Kingdom of God is not like that. “*Giving yourselves fully to the work of the Lord*” will never be in vain.

You will see that it does, indeed, **BEAR FRUIT**. Things happen when you get involved in God’s work. You may well see **answered prayer**. Having toiled away in prayer asking for God to involve himself in a situation, you see that actually happen. Healing, peace, clarity – whatever – you can see that God is at work because things happen that could never have happened without his intervention. You may well see **changed lives**, possibly as a result of your prayers, but also because of your conversations, your quiet but persistent activity in acts of love and kindness. People are different because of what you have done for God. You may see **transformed situations**, again because of your prayer, but also because of your campaigning, your persistence, your perseverance, your initiative. You do what God asks you to do and, suddenly or gradually, transformation takes place.

And as we’ve been saying recently, that may not always be immediate. That’s why we have to keep at it. It may be many years later that you see the fruit of your labours. I used to help out at summer camps for teenagers. It was hard work – not only for the couple of weeks in the summer when it actually happened, when you thought that sleep would never come again and that things could not get any more energetic, but also in the months before as you planned and prayed and tried to cope with all the things that seemed to go wrong at the last minute. When our own family came along, I stopped doing the camps and some years later I was at a conference and a person who was working for Scripture Union came up to me and said, “You’re Ian, aren’t you?” I said that I was and he introduced himself as David. I didn’t recall him, but he went on to say that years before he had been a camper at one of the camps and had given his life to

Christ there and was now working full time for God. All that effort had not been in vain, and now he was spreading the Good News of Jesus to an even greater number of kids than I ever had!

Not only does it bear fruit, but it also **BLESSES US**. We are not called to work in isolation as Christians. At least, here in the relative freedom of the West, we are not. There are always other Christians around us, even if we feel a bit on our own at work or at school, for example. So working for God gives us a sense of **participation and involvement**. We are drawn into something much bigger than ourselves, something that goes well beyond the horizons of our own little bit of the Kingdom. There's an awful lot of heresy in songs and hymns when you stop to think about them, and one, which is a favourite of many older Christians who sang it in Sunday School, is the song which includes the lines, "*You in your small corner and I in mine*". We don't keep to our "small corners". We're in it together. And even if we've had a hard week or we're trying to cope with difficult situations, we can know the prayer and support of others with whom we share our burdens. We're part of a team. For many who play team sports, that is most of the pleasure: doing stuff together.

It can bless us too with a sense of **achievement**. Yes, I know it's not our work. We don't do it in our own strength. We are not to become proud of what we might do as followers of Jesus. But we are human and we need to feel that what we are doing is actually achieving something. Working for the Kingdom of God, following the ways of Christ, means that we can actually see things happening, as we've already said. When we see our toil bearing fruit there is a real feeling of having accomplished something. We are doing stuff for the Kingdom of God: surely there can be no greater sense of achievement than that!

"HOW CAN WE BE SURE, THOUGH?"

Fair enough, we are to stick to the task to which God has called us, but even seeing it all bear fruit and feeling a bit of blessing from time to time isn't necessarily a good enough incentive for some of us, especially if things don't seem to be happening as we'd like them to now, and we are getting fed up and frustrated with it all. Well, that's what this section of Paul's letter is all about, really. Notice that he begins this verse with the word, "*Therefore ...*" Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, "*With all this going for us ...*" What we are being asked to do is a response to something that has already happened. We are doing all this for a real reason and that reason is **the resurrection of Jesus**.

If we don't have that in our sights, then what we are doing is, indeed, a waste of time. Look at what Paul writes earlier in this chapter, before the point at which we started reading this morning. Listen to these words (*1 Corinthians 15:12-17*). If Jesus isn't alive, if he has not already made a difference to this world

and to our lives, then, yes, this is a totally futile exercise. There is no point in what we are doing and what Paul is asking us to get involved in. That has happened in the past. It is already a reality and gives us a basis on which to work. But it is also the guarantee of things to come as well. Because Jesus is alive, because he has broken the power of sin and death, because he now reigns over all things, we can look forward to even greater things in the future.

One day, God is going to set all things right in this universe. One day, the Bible tells us, justice will come. Jesus will return and the evil in this world, already decisively defeated on the cross of Calvary, will be totally destroyed. Quite how that will happen, we are not privileged to know, but we do know that those who do right and who have followed the way of Jesus will be rewarded, and those who have not will have to face the consequences. Listen to what the writer of *The Letter to The Hebrews* says in *Hebrews 6:10*. God won't forget the work you've put in. He won't forget the labour that you have been involved in. He will not forget that you have "*given yourselves fully to the work of the Lord*".

Doesn't that give you an incentive to keep going? In joining in the work of Jesus here and now, we can have a sense of victory, a realisation that we will one day be amongst those who share in Jesus' victory over sin and evil and injustice. We *can* overcome those things that might scare us and shake us because we know why we're doing it – and that is because we are part of the disciples of Jesus who will overcome for eternity. He's already done it. We can be a part of it. As the song puts it, "*Because he lives, I can face tomorrow*", I can face the hard graft, the possible obstacles, the demand for commitment.

We have experienced the transforming power of Jesus Christ and we know that he is coming to put all things right. Remember the story of Robin Hood – and this is brought out very clearly in the BBCTV adaptation. He had fought with King Richard in the Holy Land. Richard had been a huge influence on him. And he knew that Richard would return to England. Whatever else happened, whatever the Sheriff of Nottingham and Guy of Gisbourne threw at him, even if he were to die in his struggle for justice, he knew that Richard would sort it all out when he returned. It is just like that with Jesus. And that's why we need to stand firm and give ourselves fully to his work. That's why we know it won't be in vain.

Let me close with an illustration I've used before, but it's quite a powerful one. I wish I could track down the picture and put it in the screen. It was a poster on the notice board of a little Brethren church in Winchester that I saw as a kid. A football player, bloody, muddy and bruised, is slumped on the changing room bench, obviously defeated, his head in his hands. Above him is the speech bubble saying, "I quit!" And down in the corner is the silhouette of a hill with three crosses on it. From the central cross comes the speech bubble saying "I didn't!" "*Therefore, stand firm ...*"

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Many of these verbs in the New Testament are written in the *present continuous* tense: "keep on ..." Do not allow other things to get in the way of what God asks you to do. Keep Jesus at the very heart of all that you do. Don't be put off by other ideas. Keep reading the Bible and talking with other Christians.

"ALWAYS GIVE YOURSELVES FULLY ..."

It takes 100% effort to follow Jesus as he wants. God asks us to give everything for him, just as Jesus gave everything for us. It's not simply a question of activity, but of focus, of determination, of wanting to do, to be, to give the very best for God.

BUT WHY?

We're not just working for the sake of it, nor to get us into God's good books, or to ensure that we stay there. There is some kind of point to it all. Paul says here that "*your labour in the Lord is not in vain*". You see, work that is "*in vain*", that has no point to it, that is work just for the sake of it, is frustrating, soul-destroying stuff. Working for the good of the Kingdom of God is not like that. "*Giving yourselves fully to the work of the Lord*" will never be in vain.

It does **BEAR FRUIT**.

- **Answered prayer.**
- **Changed lives.**
- **Transformed situations.**

(That may not always be immediate. It may be many years later that you see the fruit of your labours.)

It also **BLESSES US**.

- **Participation and involvement..**
- **A sense of achievement**

"HOW CAN WE BE SURE, THOUGH?"

Paul begins this verse with the word, "*Therefore ...*" We are doing all this for a real reason: **the resurrection of Jesus**. Look at *1 Corinthians 15:12-17*. Because Jesus is alive, because he has broken the power of sin and death, because he now reigns over all things, we can look forward to even greater things in the future. Read *Hebrews 6:10*. God won't forget the work you've put in.

Questions for discussion

1. What kinds of thing can move us from doing the work of Jesus? How can we overcome that?
2. What do you understand by "*always give yourself fully*"? Is it possible?
3. Can you give any examples of your "*labour in the Lord*" not being in vain? How did that make you feel?
4. What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make to the way in which you work for him?
5. When you are struggling with your commitment to God's work, what helps you to keep going?
6. How can we support each other in this?