

TRINITY XV  
20 September 2020

Readings: Jonah 3.10-end of 4; Psalm 145.1-8;  
Philippians 1.21-end; Matthew 20.1-16

At the beginning of the reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians we heard him say (1.21): *"to me, living is Christ and dying is gain"*.

At first thought, these may seem like strange words. As Christians, living and working for Jesus, we might wonder how our death can possibly be gain.

Of course, what Paul meant was that after death we're united with Jesus, an amazing thing for any Christian who's spent their life loving and believing in Him and waiting patiently to meet Him face to face.

And, if we're living a truly Christian life, then our life will be tantamount to Christ if we've "put on" Christ, and lived our life totally in Him and for Him.

I recently came across some words by someone who had been asked exactly what Jesus meant to him, and this is how he answered:

*"Jesus Christ is more than an historical figure. He's the only-begotten Son of God, and Saviour of the world. Just as importantly, he's my Lord and Saviour. He's the essence of everything I am and all that I hope to be. His teachings guide me. His example inspires me. The fact that he died for my sins gives me hope that there's a place in his kingdom for me. I can't imagine life apart from Jesus. I know for sure that his Spirit lives in me."*

I admit to being rather blown away by this man's beautiful, poetic, flowing articulation of his relationship with Jesus. But, if we needed to formulate our own response to the same question, I suspect many of us may say something similar. With the general busyness of our lives, however, we just don't get around to specifically articulating it and, even if we did, we may not express it quite so beautifully.

I think that gentleman's sentiments were something similar to what Paul was meaning when he said that for him "to live was Christ". Paul's overriding wish, of course, was to die and be united with Jesus Christ whom he loved so much, but he was aware of the work that Jesus called him to do, and he got on and did it. His testimony about that work is contained in his letters in the New Testament.

Paul's selfless devotion to Jesus' work is articulated in his words to the Philippians (1.24-25): *"for me to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue*

*with all of you for your progress and joy in faith*". His commitment to his work and lack of thought for himself totally reflects the self-sacrificing attitude of Jesus.

He added a caveat to this statement. He told the Philippians (1.27): "*live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*". Paul was telling them clearly and honestly that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that life and death are measured in the depth of our love for, and our relationship to, Him.

There would be problems, as Paul told them, but believing in Christ was a privilege, as was suffering for Him. The Philippians had opponents, just as we today know that there are those who may scoff and deride us for our faith, perhaps even mocking our commitment to regular public worship, when we could be out shopping or playing sport or enjoying ourselves in some self-indulgent way. But self-indulgence, for a devoted Christian, is not "putting on Christ".

Paul was under house arrest and incarcerated when he wrote to the Philippians, but he wanted them to know that he was all right and that, even in his confinement, God was at work using him to lead others to Christ. Note that Paul is upbeat and confident of God's grace and love, even during his incarceration. And, make no mistake about it, Paul was not ready to throw in the towel. He had ambitious plans for the future, and had anything but a death wish.

Does there ever come a time when an active, healthy person is ready to die? We all want to go to heaven but, simultaneously, we don't want to leave our loved ones. We don't want to miss out on an upcoming birthday or anniversary; a graduation or wedding; a new birth or baptism; a family reunion or annual gathering. It's natural. None of you would want to miss those things in your families, and neither would I in mine.

We all want to go to heaven, but just not right now! That's the nature of life. We live with one foot firmly planted on this earth and the other trying to test out what might await us after this life. But, regardless of anything else, our lives are measured by the depth of our relationship with Jesus, as in the gentleman's testimony which I quoted earlier. Because, if we live in a right relationship with Jesus, we will, as that person said, know him as our Lord and Saviour. He will be the essence of everything we are and hope to be. His teaching will guide us and his example inspire us. The fact that he died for our sins will give us the sure and certain hope that there's a place in God's kingdom for us. We will certainly be aware of the Holy Spirit within us, and we will not be able to imagine life without Jesus. And living life in this way will surely give us a foretaste of heaven, because such an intimate and fulfilling relationship with Jesus will feel like heaven on earth to us.

If we think about it, God has offered us the best of both worlds: fullness of life in the glory of his creation in the company of those we love, as well

as the promise of everlasting life when this life comes to an end. What more could we possibly ask?

The more we look to God and trust in the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the more we experience life in all its abundance, and worldly things become less appealing. Indulging ourselves in whatever way will no longer hold the same attraction for us.

This is reflected in the words of the well-known hymn written by singer, musician and hymnwriter Helen Lemmel, the daughter of a Wesleyan Methodist pastor and born in 1864 in Wardle, Greater Manchester:

*"Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in His wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,  
In the light of His glory and grace."*

Another of Helen Lemmel's hymns is:

*"I've seen the face of Jesus.  
He smiled in love on me;  
It filled my heart with rapture,  
My soul with ecstasy.  
The scars of deepest anguish  
Were lost in glory bright;  
I've seen the face of Jesus.  
It was a wondrous sight!  
Oh, glorious face of beauty,  
Oh gentle touch of care;  
If here it is so blessed,  
What will it be up there?"*

So, what will it be up there? Before we eventually find out, let's first try to experience a little bit of heaven here on earth as we set about living the remainder of our lives loving Jesus with the passion with which He loves us, and following Paul's example of working for Him tirelessly and self-sacrificingly.

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