



Philippians 3.4-14
Matthew 21.33-45
4th October 2020

Finding our Convictions

INTRODUCTION TO TODAY'S THEME

There is a scene in the TV drama *The West Wing* which has a group from a newly democratised country visit the White House. These are the movers and shakers in a country that was once under Soviet rule. Their task is to draw up a new constitution; to find out what really matters in a democracy and make sure it will be enshrined in their country's new foundation document.

To help them do this, Toby, the White House Communications Director, has invited an eccentric American Professor of Law to sit with them. This process goes on far longer than Toby had bargained for with, in his view, little progress being made. He sends sandwiches and sodas into the Roosevelt Room, yet all they seem to be doing, day by day, is sitting with this wacky professor discussing points of democratic principle without actually drawing up a new constitution.

In the end Toby confronts the professor and says he'd expected more progress rather than all this discussion. The wacky professor takes him to one side and reprimands him for his impatience. He asks Toby to view the process differently. The professor's aim had never, in fact, been that they write the constitution for their new country at The White House. But that, over these few days, locked in discussion in the Roosevelt Room, these movers and shakers should become so inspired by the topic they are discussing, so motivated and moulded by these democratic ideals, that they go back to their country, now ready and committed to writing a new constitution for it. They would return home now knowing what their task truly was.

Well, as I read this Sunday's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, I sense a similar process has gone on in his life. By chapter three of this

letter we are in no doubt that Paul has changed course in his life. Once he was a persecutor of Christians, now he establishes new congregations. Once he believed in a ring-fenced religion, now he preaches about a God who crosses boundaries. And this change of heart, this new understanding of what faith truly means is focused on his view of Jesus. Once he was his enemy and now, he has become his friend.

Paul's Roosevelt Room was the Damascus Road. On that road, and subsequently under his mentor Ananias, he takes on board ideas which re-define him. So much so that he writes now just as much in poetry as he does prose. This one-time pedantic rule keeper now pens a wonderful hymn about the humility of Jesus in Philippians 2 and a beautiful poem about love in I Corinthians 13. And here, in Philippians 3 he talks of his relationship with Jesus in terms of being 'in' him and becoming 'like' him.

Paul was changed and energised by the person and message of Jesus. And it was that Christian identity that sustained him even as he was under house arrest in Rome writing this letter to the congregation at Philippi.

We all need those sorts of foundational beliefs and convictions in faith too. Ideas that have power to define who we are and convictions that take us through the storms of life. Paul says his new goal was to 'know' Jesus: and that's a helpful way to describe a journey of faith.

LIVING OUR CONVICTIONS

St Paul was a man of deep convictions. He seems to have been born that way. It was part of his nature to believe passionately and to live fearlessly.

In terms of religious heritage he came from the top drawer. If there was a first century equivalent of the BBC ancestry programme: *Who do you think you are?*...Paul would have been an excellent candidate. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, and that was impressive in his circles. Of the twelve tribes the two thought to be the very best, the ones most faithful to the Covenant, were those of Joseph and Benjamin.

Academically he was strong having developed his forensic mind in the very

particular ways of The Pharisees. And in terms of race, coming from a family with Roman citizenship, Paul had a passport to a life of privilege.

Yet, here in Philippians 3 he says he's glad to have left all this behind; actually he goes even further and says, when he views his past, he considers the old him to be a loser.

Yet, it wasn't always like this.

Paul was so energised by deeply held convictions against the Christians that he used violence to further his aims. He obtains a High Priest's licence to drive the congregation at Damascus back into the synagogue, using terror and force if necessary. And he attends the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, even holding the coats of those who threw the stones.

Paul was a man whose convictions so overtook him that he falls for the idea that it's right to coerce people, it's OK to terrorise a congregation, it's even acceptable to stand by and watch a man die, if all this means you'll get people to agree with your views on faith, ritual and religious tradition. Paul was a man so obsessed with religious rules that he was prepared to shed blood to see they were kept.

I'm not sure we are horrified enough about his past. He advocated killing people in the name of God.

This is a past that needed dealing with.

I suspect it's not entirely true, either, that Paul really ever forgot his past. OK, in today's passage he talks about leaving it behind and facing a new direction, but that's not quite the same thing as forgetting it. As one commentator I read this week puts it: *Our past contains the roots out of which our present grows.*

We might think the seminal moment of change came for Paul on the Road to Damascus. And for him it was certainly a cross-roads experience and he was never the same again.

Yet, just maybe the event that fuelled that transitional moment might have been the experience that went just before it; namely the stoning of Stephen.

Maybe there his eyes began to open to the grisly consequence of his rigidly held convictions, the death of a fellow human being. Was this not getting out of control? To watch someone die whilst they prayed, would this not change anyone's mind?

For many of us it's as we meet with people, rather than just read about them, that our perspectives change.

At Theological College our tutors, wisely, sent us to help out at something called the Camberwell Reception Centre in South East London on a Friday night. Here, in a shabby church hall, people who were homeless came for a meal served by us. We were encouraged to not just give out the soup or tea, but to chat to the people we were serving. It was as we met them, and they shared their stories with us that I suspect our views on who was typically homeless changed. I remember speaking to a man who owned his own hair dressing saloon, only to lose it, his wife and home because of tax evasion and now, after employing four people he had nothing.

It may be misquoted and over used, but there is deep truth in the saying that we ought not judge another until we have walked in their moccasins.

I suspect that seeing the way Stephen died changed Paul forever. He was getting deeper and deeper into violence and now the prospect of Damascus with even more bloodshed began to nag away at him. So, on the journey Paul had that moment of epiphany realising his convictions were eating him up and robbing him of his humanity. This had to stop, he had to change – he describes it as a meeting with Jesus, and I suspect it was one deeply influenced by the memory of Stephen.

We own our past with honest reflection so that we can move on as wiser people. Sometimes we do that with tears as we seek forgiveness from those we have wronged.

Yet at the centre of the Christian narrative is the idea that repentance leads to renewal. We can move forward in life.

Paul does this. He changes from the inside out. He meets with Jesus. He receives instruction from Ananias. He is blessed by a welcoming community at Damascus, and after a few years in that supportive and nurturing congregation he emerges a man whose convictions have changed. He now believes in love and inclusion, rather than hate and uniformity.

And it's these convictions that now support him in tough, even life-threatening circumstances.

Paul and Silas visited Philippi, a city which had been a Roman colony for two hundred years, around AD50. The book we call Philippians is probably the compilation of three letters sent to this congregation about ten years later by Paul. Commentators are not absolutely sure where he was when writing them, but many think it might have been in a Roman jail.

In other words, although Paul is tremendously upbeat in these letters his situation is dire. Indeed, it's commonly thought that he, like Stephen, eventually became a martyr for his faith.

Yet listen to the hope that fills his heart in chapter two: *I count everything sheer loss, far outweighed by the gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...my one desire is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...I press on, straining towards that which lies ahead.*

In Philippians we discover a man who is motivated by love (he urges this congregation to put aside their differences and find unity), he preaches inclusivity (he rejects the idea that you can only be a Christian if you keep certain rituals), he welcomes the blessings of community (he extols the virtues of his friend Epaphroditus, who the Philippians have sent to him for companionship) and he is constantly inspired by the person and message of Jesus (about whose humility he writes of in a beautiful hymn in chapter 2).

These settled, generous and wise conviction sustain the apostle during one of the bleakest episodes of his life.

We too are going through uncertain and unsettling times. What part have our convictions played in our lives during these days of Pandemic?

Inevitably much has been written about how we've been doing things differently. There's the joy of Zoom. A friend of mine recently told me of the delight she had joining in a college book launch seminar with 99 other people, some from the other side of the world. A far greater number had access to that event than if it had been held at that Oxford college in person.

Yet, isn't it also true that, even if it isn't the old ways that have sustained us, it's the old truths, our convictions that have given us fresh strength in the most unusual of times.

Beliefs give us sticking power.

Some of you have told me, indeed Valerie wrote about it on the website, that the words of hymns, old and new, have meant a lot to you even if we can't sing them. Perhaps it's precisely because many of us are reading them rather than singing them that they come to us with renewed conviction.

We may not have been able to meet each other with as much freedom as before – and I suspect that has strengthened our conviction that community is good.

We may not have been able to speak much to people in church – and I suspect that has strengthened our conviction that keeping contact, whether by email or phone, isn't a luxury but a necessity.

We may not have felt optimistic about the future, or even become scared about the present – but that has strengthened our conviction that prayer and lament, even just calling out to God is simply a good and right thing to do in our vulnerability.

We may have felt powerless – but that has strengthened our conviction that God has blessed us with a society in which we are not alone as scientists search for vaccines, governments spend millions giving immediate assistance to citizens, shop keepers stay open to feed us, and hospitals to care for us.

I long and pray for the day when we might gather as a complete congregation to both lament the pain of this time but also to give thanks that God strengthened and blessed us during these days through the gift of his presence and the gift of each other.

In our bleak moments may we, like Paul, hang on to our convictions.

May it be so, in the name of God, who is worthy of both our trust and prayers. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 16th September 2020