

Pentecost 19, Year A

Isaiah 5:1-7, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

Dr Michael Moseley – he of the 5:2 weight loss diet – has a podcast called “Just One Thing”. In it he identifies just one thing you can do to improve your health and wellbeing. And from the number of podcasts it seems there are 57 varieties of “Just One Thing”! Just like Heinz.

Personally I don’t think that Paul would have much truck with Dr Mosely. Nevertheless, in our epistle today, Paul does address Michael Mosley’s question, “What one thing can you do...?” *One thing I do...* writes Paul, *I press on.*

I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

But before we consider this “one thing” I think we should look at verses 10 – 12a:

I want to know Christ ... becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this...

Has this verse ever caused you to wobble in your Christian faith? Do you fear that, when push comes to shove, you will not make the grade?

Is Paul expressing doubts as to whether he truly has a “ticket to heaven”? Probably not. In Romans (3:22) he writes *The righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*

Simple, straight forward; it is a gift. And in this epistle he writes:

For the sake of Jesus I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, (i.e. never putting a foot wrong) but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

So why, even in the next verse, does Paul give us the impression that he needs to do more? If he’s talking about eternal destiny isn’t it “once saved always saved” with the only requirement being to keep short accounts, confessing our sins as we forgive others? Well yes, on the bottom line, it is. Faith in Christ Jesus brings redemption, forgiveness of sins and resurrection.

So the question remains. Why does Paul seem to be expressing doubts as to whether he will be judged to have done enough to attain resurrection from the dead? Surely he believes his own assertion that faith is the sole requirement?

Well, assuming that Paul is not just hedging his bets, it depends on what he means here by *resurrection from the dead*. There are two possible explanations given that I want to share with you.

First, because the Greek word for resurrection here – *exanastasis* - is unique in the New Testament and means “out of resurrection” it is suggested that Paul is looking towards a second resurrection of selected persons, to an award ceremony, a prize giving. This would in fact fit with verse 14: *I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.*

Alternatively, or maybe as well, having been brought spiritually from death to life, Paul is saying that he has not yet living the full resurrection life that is there in Jesus as in Romans (6:3-4):

Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead..., we too may live a new life.

And this fits with *I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*

The fundamental goal of the Christian life is not the ticket to heaven. That's a given; it goes with the territory. It's just the starting gate. No the goal of the Christian life is primarily to know God, not just know about him but know him personally, intimately, and secondarily to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

In this epistle, written some years after Paul confidently asserted to the Galatians (2:20) *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me* he is less dogmatic. Now he says *Not that I have already obtained all this...* In other words Paul hasn't yet reached the state of really fully knowing Jesus or the power of his resurrection life within. Realism has set in. And can't we identify with that!

Isn't it the case that we don't know Jesus that well, probably not as well as Paul did? We don't know God intimately. And we don't fully walk in resurrection life in the power of Holy Spirit with the living water flowing out from us and the fruits of the Spirit in abundance, do we?

So Paul says he presses on to know Christ. *This one thing* – it's a priority. So it should be for us too so that we increasingly experience the life of Christ in our own lives.

But first we need to ask ourselves whether we actually believe that God wants to know us intimately. Maybe we feel that our past – either what we have been brought up to believe about ourselves or what we have done, or failed to do – means that God wants to keep his distance from us. Far from it! That's a lie. We are new creations in Christ; the old has passed away. The past does not define us or our relationship with God.

So let us be like Paul who writes *one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on...*

So how can we press on? What can we do, apart from partaking of the Eucharist, that will help? There are lots of ways. I suspect that there may be 57 varieties but I am going to suggest only seven.

1. Be still. Psalm 46 tells us to *Be still and know that I am God*. Our 21st century lifestyle generally precludes stillness. We have to deliberately make time just to pause for a while, even only a few minutes, to allow God to make himself known to us. Make it a priority.
2. Read the Bible. Take time to meet God in the Scriptures. Maybe do Lectio Divina or spend time meditating on a passage. Perhaps choose a verse to meditate on during the day.
3. Connect with God in worship. Sing or play a hymn or song of worship, write a poem, paint a picture. Lift God high.
4. Marvel. Go for a walk or sit and look at pictures or videos and marvel at God's creation. Jesus taught that we can grow in our understanding of God if we consider the lilies of the field or the birds of the air.

5. Pray. Not just a string of petitions but aiming to have a two way conversation with God. Ask for his opinion. Aim to hear Holy Spirit speaking. Maybe write down your conversation with him.
6. Fellowship. A great way to know God more intimately. Meet with other Christians, and not just on Sundays, to share with and encourage one another. Meet God in fellow believers.
7. Follow your calling, your ministry. Paul knew that one thing that Christ had taken hold of him for was to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And it is as we partner with God in our ministry that we get to know him better and become more like Jesus.

Think you don't have a calling? Pray about it. Ask God. He has prepared good works for us to do, individually or together. (Ephesians 2:10) Still not sure? Think about the last time that you heard God asking you to do something and then ask yourself whether you did it. If not, you know what to do...!

You may be able to do better than my suggestions. But whatever, let us make it a priority that this one thing we will do, to press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of us, to know him intimately and to be like him. Amen

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