

Philippians 3:13b-4:1**Luke 13:31 – end****HC @ Foxton**

As most of you know I have a shy Ginger cat - Erik. I always have a cat and have had them all my life. When I was first ordained I had two cats, brothers from the same litter - Hector & Silvester. They were very different, each with his own character and priorities. Silvester was a long haired silver grey tabby and Hector was a ginger lad. I always used to say that they had different genes, Silvester's were designer genes and Hector's were workman's overalls. Silvester was also a great hunter and one morning he caught a mouse. Having caught it he thought he would have a bit of fun with it before having a meal. It was a fairly lively mouse and they were playing hide and seek in the bathroom when Hector came along saw the mouse, thought FOOD! Picked it up and trotted off with it. He came back a few minutes later licking his lips.

The expression on Silvester's face was very funny. Complete astonishment. "That was my mouse" you could see him thinking. It was my prize I caught it. But his mistake was that he took it for granted. He thought he could have it any time he liked and so he was playing with it. Hector was more focused. He saw the prize and decided to take hold of it there and then. He knew exactly what he wanted and his heart and mind were set on it to the exclusion of all else.

We find this sense of total commitment, of being focused on the goal ahead when we hear St Paul speaking to the early Christians and never more so than in his letter to the Christians at Philippi. Paul's whole focus is on Jesus. He talks of taking hold of that for which Christ took hold of him. He wants to fully know Christ and to receive all the fullness that Jesus offers us. Paul never forgot the occasion on the Damascus Road when Jesus took hold of his life and transformed him, his thinking, his priorities and his motivation. From that moment on his focus was upon Jesus Christ who died for him. His priority was to fully know Christ and to allow Christ to transform his heart and mind until he obtained the perfection of Christ himself. He reminds his listeners, "our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who

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by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

Paul knows that it is his encounter with Jesus that transformed him and talks of being taken hold of by him, but equally he knows that it is his response to Christ that will enable him to reach his goal. He says "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me". Christ has his plans and purpose for each one of us but it is our responsibility to reach out and take hold of it in faith and commitment. If we take our salvation for granted in the same way that Silvester took his mouse for granted we may end up losing all. Paul sums up his attitude in this way: "Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus".

1. Forgetting what is behind

Paul had many reasons to boast and for having confidence in himself. He had the privilege of Birth right, learning, blameless behaviour - he kept the law with the best and was zealous in pursuit of his religion. He had grounds for confidence in himself and his upbringing but when he encountered Christ face to face he realised that these things were less than worthless to him. "Not only have I counted these things loss for Christ's sake but I count all things loss". He realised that valuable as his background, status and learning were they were less than nothing in contrast to knowing Christ and his enormous love. He realised that if holding on to his worldly grounds for confidence meant that he would lose Christ he would have lost everything of value and have been a total loser.

Paul's language is always vivid and at times extreme. He talks about losing everything for Christ's sake and goes on to say "I consider them rubbish". Surely that is a bit strong. His family background, his learning, his religious upbringing were none of them wrong, they were positive and had made him the man

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he was, so how could he turn his back on them and call them rubbish. The word used is actually offal or dung. What he is saying here is not that our family and upbringing is bad but that even the good and the best is counted as rubbish in contrast to what Christ offers us. They are not only less valuable than Christ but are in the highest degree contemptible when they come into competition with him.

If we, like Paul, want to fully know Christ's power in our lives we need to turn away from the things that we put our confidence in. We have to turn our backs on our earthly security - our brains, good looks, family background, our personal achievements because, good as they might be, they pale into insignificance in contrast to the joy of knowing and serving Jesus. Paul recognised that his righteousness - his claim to be holy would never be achieved by obeying the law or performing religious duty - his only hope, his only claim to holiness came through faith in Christ who had died for him. He realised that if he really wanted to receive all that Jesus had won for him on the cross he needed to let go of the things on which he based his confidence.

For each of us these things will be different, but we will all have things that need to be let go of in order for us to fully put our faith and trust in Christ. It may be that our confidence comes from knowing ourselves loved and accepted by someone special to us, or our security might be in our job or our brains. But none of these stand for anything in the eternal scheme of things. As we stand before God we are completely naked and defenceless and it is only as we accept the righteousness that Jesus won for us that we have any grounds for confidence at all. So Paul knew he had to turn his back on the past and its priorities and achievements and

2 Strain towards what is ahead

Paul had his heart set upon Christ. He was aware that even though he trusted Jesus and had committed his life to him in response to Christ's love for him he did not yet fully know

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Christ. He longed for that perfect understanding and close relationship with Jesus and to experience all the salvation bought for us by Christ's blood shed for us on the cross. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings". For Paul knowing Jesus meant identifying fully with him, in his life, death and resurrection. He knew that Jesus has the power to transform us and to totally change us from inside out. That same power that brought Christ from death to life is at work in each one of us and Paul longed to fully see that transforming power in his own life.

He knew that that would involve pain and suffering because identifying with Jesus means identifying with not only the power but also the pain and humiliation that He embraced for our sakes. He knew that fully knowing the risen Christ would mean pain and hardship for himself but he willingly sought that because he knew that Christ would be there too in that suffering and weakness.

And in doing that he knew he would see Christ's resurrection power at work in his own life and in the lives of others until eventually he would experience eternal life for himself. Paul's focus was firmly fixed on what lay ahead. He saw himself to be a citizen of heaven, not of this earth. Our homeland is in heaven and because of that his focus was on obtaining perfection. He knew that for the moment any perfection he possessed came from the perfection of Jesus and his death on the cross but his aim was that eventually he too would be perfected in heaven. He was very aware that although Jesus had won this prize for him it was something that he had to own for himself, something that he had to take hold of and make his own and so he said

3. I press on towards the goal to win the prize

He knew that the way he lived day by day was important. He couldn't take what Jesus had won for him for granted. He needed to give to Jesus the total commitment that He had

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shown towards him. "Only let us live up to what we have already attained." Because of Jesus's death for us on the cross we are each one of us citizens of heaven. But that means that we have to live up to that reality. We have to embrace the fact of who we have become and live as God's children. Having the confidence that comes from knowing ourselves loved and accepted by our heavenly father; but also having the priorities and concerns of those whose homeland is in heaven. It means sitting loosely to the things of this world, those things that give us confidence and security here and developing God's concerns and priorities. We need to allow Jesus to transform us in his risen power, giving us his love for each other, his holiness and purity in our attitudes and actions and seeking to know more of him so that we eventually "take hold of that for which Christ took hold of us"

Vester lost the mouse because he took it for granted that it belonged to him. He thought that he could have it any time he liked and that he could afford to play around for a bit. It is all too easy for us to take for granted what Christ has won for us at such great cost to himself. We must guard against that and, with Paul, need to Forget what is behind and straining towards what is ahead press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Jesus Christ.