

## **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October**

Service prepared by Rev. Peter Lyth

### **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord God, we are all so different, each our own being;  
and yet you love and care for us all,  
you nurture and protect us.

How can we not be thankful to you  
for all that the journey with you offers!

We thank you that you guide us,  
in unexpected ways, to find the right way in life.

We thank you that when we wander, you draw us back to you,  
give us new direction and encourage us to follow where you lead.

We thank you that you know our individual needs and quirks,  
and yearn for us to be on the journey of life with you.

We thank you that the pains of life can be overshadowed  
by the joy of walking with you.

For all these blessings and more,  
we give you thanks and praise.

**Amen**

**Read** Philippians 3: 4-14

### **Sermon by Rev Peter Lyth**

One of the popular genres of TV programme are “makeover” shows. Many of them are about houses. “Homes under the hammer” is a popular one. I don’t watch it much, given it’s during the day, but it is enjoyable viewing as someone will buy a wreck of a property at auction for a bargain price and spend a budget (often exceeded) to do it up. At the end, the estate agents that saw the house at the beginning return to give the value in its new state. Often the properties are unrecognisable from where they started and their value has increased accordingly. Is it my imagination though or do many of them look the same as each other? Makeover series are not just confined to houses of course. “Ground Force” looked at gardens and “What not to wear” looked, as you might expect, at clothing. There are many such series about.

In the reading from Philippians, Paul is giving his religion a makeover. He started as a Jew – a Pharisee in fact. He describes what he was at the start of the journey. Circumcised, a Jew, a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin, a persecutor of the early church. If you were to have a checklist of the attributes of a member of the Jewish religious establishment, he would tick all the boxes. However, that was before he started what nowadays would be described as his “personal journey”. But then something changes. In this case, there is no mention of a light or a voice or a vision, or the Road to Damascus. Instead, all Paul refers to is “whatever

gains I had, I have to come to regard as loss because of Christ". Yes, this is a conversion experience, but, rather than being the solution to some unnamed problem or yearning, rather it made the accomplishments of the past worthless as he looked to the new.

To go back to the house makeover analogy, - remember bathrooms in the 1970's? There were pink bathroom suites and turquoise ones, yellow baths and – maybe the most prized of all – the Avocado suite. Nowadays, someone will look at such a bathroom as worthless – ready for ripping out and putting in a skip. What was prized before is no longer of any value. Paul looks at the achievements in his CV and realises that they are illusory. They are without value. That is because he has had what the psychologists refer to as a "Gestalt moment". His understanding of himself and his worldview shifts as he gains, "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus". Know that he knows Jesus Christ, he realises that what he was before measures up to nought.

But we need to know quite what he means by "knowing Christ Jesus" – after all this is a saying that can easily become cliched. That is revealed in the rest of this reading.

Firstly, it means being "in him". If all the believers form the body of Christ, then he is connected with them to form part of this body and is connected with Jesus and all his brothers and sisters in Christ. He has become part of that community. Secondly, it means leaving behind all the righteousness through achievements that he has made in his own right and instead seizing the righteousness that comes "through faith in Christ". So, if Paul is to become righteous in the sight of God, it is not through his own work, but through God's work in him. Ultimately that will end up in resurrection.

But Paul is careful to avoid the pitfall that can come with his realisation. He realises that he has started on a new journey. He has not arrived at his goal. However hungry Paul is to have reached the goal of knowing Christ, he is well aware that he is not there yet. Indeed he may never quite get there. But nonetheless, he regards it as his life's work – his ambition to get to know God, his saviour better.

So there are a couple of lessons to be learned from this passage.

The first is that Paul is "pressing on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus". It is his life's work – he gives the impression of straining on and working towards that goal. It reminds us that knowing Jesus is something to be prized – something worth working for rather than something taken for granted.

The second thing is mentioned in verse 12, "but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." In other words, this achievement of the goal of knowing Christ is not just done in his own strength. Similarly it is not just our achievement. We cannot reach the goal by our efforts alone. So Paul's endurance of suffering, giving up of everything that he thought precious and striving for his new goal all take place under God's grace. Paul's progress towards becoming more like Christ take place because Christ reaches out to Paul as Paul reaches out to Christ. When Paul had his conversion – Christ reached out

and grasped him. That fact is very important. He didn't earn it somehow. It was a gift of grace. Now he is responding with all his strength.

The way that Paul understands his conversion is very different to the understanding of conversion that often takes place. Often people think that conversion is the end of the process – something that gives all the answers. Paul found that his conversion shook up what he thought were the answers and set him off on a new quest – one that was to understand and know Christ more and be more like him. It was to be a whole new way of being. It was the ultimate makeover. And it's one that we can have too!

### **Prayers of intercession**

God of one and God of all, we pray:

for those who don't know who they are,

who can't understand themselves or their place in society;

for those who don't 'fit in', who are or seem to be different;

for those who don't know where they come from,

their heritage or home, their family or bloodline;

for those who feel lost and isolated, confused and afraid,

rudderless or homeless, strangers in a strange land;

for those who wish they were someone else,

or somewhere else, in some other time and place;

In your great mercy, Lord, hear our prayers and grant surer journeys for them all.

**Amen**

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