

## Sermon – 14/02/2010 am

### Standing Firm but Not Standing Still

Study Text: Philippians 3:13-14

There is a story about an Australian soldier who got lost on the streets of London during a thick fog. He came across another man in uniform, a British officer. 'Hey mate, can you tell me where I am? I'm completely baffled in this fog'. The British officer stopped, stood upright, and said 'Do you know who I am?' With that he walked off. 'Blimey' said the soldier, 'I don't know where I am, but he doesn't know who he is!'

Do you know who you are? Do you know where you are? The apostle Paul knew who he was and where he was going. He was a sinner saved by grace. He was a new creation in Christ Jesus, the old had gone and the new had come. Christ Jesus had taken hold of him and made him his servant. 'Paul, a bondservant of Christ' was how he introduced himself in this letter. Paul was a man who was in Christ, and a man who was following Christ. *The life which I now live ... I live by faith in the Son of God* (Galatians 3:20). *The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want ... he leads me besides the still waters* (Psalm 23).

Do you like the title for this message? I found it on the website of the Presbyterian seminary in India. This is their motto – 'standing firm but not standing still'. Paul has dealt with the standing firm. He spoke about the righteousness which is from God by faith. He was saved by grace through faith. But this was not the end of his salvation – it was just the beginning. He was not standing still. He was on the move, he was pressing on in Christ, for Christ and towards Christ.

*Brothers I do not count myself to have apprehended or laid hold of it* (3:13). Paul continues on the subject of sanctification. He had not yet laid hold of that for which Christ laid hold of him, that being eternal life, a life of living fully in Christ and finally being conformed to his perfection and glory.

Paul tells the Philippians once again that he is pressing on in the Christian life. The term 'brothers' makes his appeal more personal and urgent. Perfectionist teaching may not seem that dangerous to us but it was to the apostle. Why was this? Was there some false teaching coming into the church at Philippi? Paul began this chapter condemning Judaizers who had come or would surely come and threaten the unity of this church. They taught that all Christians had to become like Jews. They had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses if they were to be 'perfect' Christians.

Paul knew their thinking because he was a Jew himself. He once claimed to be blameless under the law. If salvation is by works, or by faith plus works, it is possible for people to consider themselves perfect. Listen carefully to someone who believes in perfection and you will hear an emphasis on works not faith.

#### Forgetting

*But one thing I do* said the apostle (3:13). What was this one thing? Actually he tells us two or three things that he was doing, but they all relate to the same purpose. If we look at the action words, verbs or participles, in these verses we find 'forgetting', 'reaching' forward and 'pressing on'. We will look at 'forgetting' first.

*Forget things that are past.* We are usually told to remember things but there are things that we must forget if we are to progress in the Christian life. Too many people are burdened by their past

life, by their own sins, or by the sins of others. The natural man finds it difficult, if not impossible, to forgive or forget. At other times we look back to the good old days and start to live in them. While ever we are looking back we are not moving ahead – or we are doing so blindly!

What things did Paul have in mind to forget? He has just outlined his past as a Pharisee. He had achieved a lot as a Jew. He was top of the class and became widely respected, and feared, as a teacher of the law. He lived a comfortable life without persecution. When Christ took hold of him he lost all this. He did so gladly. He did not think of going back to this old way despite the pressure the Jews were putting on him. He warned the believers at Philippi not to start thinking of the past, of the time when life was easy because the world loved them as one of its own.

The Israelites fell into this trap of looking back. After the Lord delivered them from Egypt in a mighty manner and was leading them towards the Promised Land, they started to look back. *We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic* (Numbers 11:5). The Lord got angry with them and struck them with a plague.

These people knew about Lot's wife, about how she turned back while fleeing the wicked city of Sodom. She epitomises the danger of turning back (Luke 17:32). Jesus made it clear to any who would follow him that they must leave everything and not look back. *No one having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of heaven* (Luke 9:62). Sadly many have found following Jesus too costly and gone back to their old ways. *Forget those things* we are told. Burn your bridges with the past and press on in Christ. Be single minded in your quest for Christ and his glory.

## Forward March

A soldier busy in battle does not get involved in civilian matters (I Timothy 2:3). Day and night he is alert to the call of his commanding officer. He does not have time to think about other things. Similarly the athlete does not think about anything but the track ahead and the finish line. He or she runs with one aim, that of winning the race (I Corinthians 9:24).

Paul probably had the Olympic Games in mind as he wrote these words. We will see more of this picture shortly as we look at the prize. But for now it is the race that portrays the Christian life. In some ways the Christian life is more like an endurance race. We face many obstacles and many distracting diversions along the way. This is what John Bunyan pictured in his allegory called Pilgrim's Progress. The aim of this race is to get to the finish.

There is nothing more disappointing than to see an athlete give up before getting to the finish line. They may take ill, but sometimes they simply notice that they are coming last and give up. But if they press on and get to the finish, albeit well after the winner, they usually get loud applause for crossing the finish line

*Reaching/straining forward to those things that are ahead* (3:13). Bang! goes the starter's gun and they are off. They are out of the blocks and strain with every muscle in their body to get to the tape first. They thrust their body forward as they approach the tape hoping to get a head in front of the one next to them. Is this how you view your Christian life? This is how the apostle envisaged his life in Christ.

Paul did not see himself as a monk in a monastery. Reading the Bible and praying were essential but this was not the sum of his life. He was out in the world preaching and teaching the gospel. We get to know Christ when we are serving him.

In India we had a ministry to children in the villages. Students who joined us in this ministry grew in their faith as they confronted the challenges of this ministry. They had to explain the gospel to those who had never heard about Jesus. They had to deal with opposition. They had to learn about teamwork. You will learn about Christ while serving him. In the heat of battle you will learn to depend on Christ.

We must stand firm, but not stand still. Let us not stagnate in our Christian life. It is all too easy to get distracted or discouraged. If we do we will find we are not growing in the Lord. The Lord has provided the means of grace for us in the church. Those who participate in the Bible study are growing in the Lord. Those who have regular devotions at home will be growing in the Lord. Those who engaged in ministry will be growing in the Lord.

## For The Prize

*I press on toward the goal for the prize (3:14).* Here is the last of the action words – ‘press on’ or ‘pursue’. What was Paul pursuing? What was he striving to obtain? Athletes do not usually go into a race simply to show off their shoes or clothes. In Paul’s day they ran naked! If this was their purpose they would run slowly so everyone could see them. Some Christians can be distracted by worldly ambition and fame.

One commentator stressed that ‘we can err by looking at so distant a future that we miss the more immediate blessing God has in store for this life.’ A tendency to err the other way seems more common today. People take the criticism ‘too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good’ too seriously. If we are too earthly minded we are of no good to ourselves or anyone. *Set your mind on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:2).*

We will have milestones set along the way. We do not run oblivious to the needs of those around us. We urge those around us to join in the heavenward race. But we keep our eyes fixed upon the finish at all times. What is the goal? What is the prize? It is *the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (3:14)*. What does this mean?

In the Olympic Games the winner would be called to come up on an elevated platform to receive the winner’s crown of leaves. He would receive a monetary prize also. Paul was living his life with the aim of getting an imperishable crown, the crown of righteousness. He was reaching forward to the finish in the hope of receiving this crown from Christ.

Are you pressing on in Christ, or are you looking back to the good old days? Paul did not for a moment think that his best days were behind him. He forgot what was behind and was pressing forward knowing that the best was yet to come.

In the words of a chorus

*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.*

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*