

We've been looking in our sermons in recent weeks at Paul's missionary journeys as recorded in the Book of Acts. It's been a real challenge, and this week the challenge just got too much for me. I was due to preach on the story of Paul in a shipwreck, and I just couldn't do it, so I've thrown in the towel after four weeks. With hindsight, I might come to think that four weeks preaching on Paul's missionary journeys was a triumph, but today I feel defeated. So, I turned instead to the reading set for today and luckily found a wonderful bit of Paul in his letter to the Philippians, one of the churches that he founded in Philippi on his missionary journeys, which means at least I can finish this Lenten series talking about Paul and stick with a theme of journeys.

And I want to begin with the observation that whatever journey we are on, it's very important to pack appropriately. I learned this lesson the hard way a few years ago when I had to spend a very uncomfortable evening with extremely inappropriate luggage. I'd arrived at Heathrow Airport with Laura and our two children who were young teenagers at the time. We had two large suitcases with us, Laura and my son, Jacob, had one suitcase and my daughter, Miriam, had the other. I got right through to the gate at check-in about to get on the plane, and the woman there said to me, "Mr. Hargreaves, your passport is out of date." She wasn't to be persuaded otherwise, so the kids were allowed to get on the plane, and I wasn't, and one of our bags had to come off the plane as me and the bag headed back to London to get my passport renewed, only to find that there were no appointments in London available, so I had to go to a town called Peterborough outside London, get an appointment for the next day, and book into a rather shabby hotel. I got to the hotel exhausted, looking forward to taking off my sweaty clothes, and reading the book that I'd packed. So, you can imagine my disappointment when I opened my case and found that it was full of teenage girl's clothes because I'd got Miriam's case off the plane. So, I had a miserable night with inappropriate luggage.

Unlike my daughter, St. Paul traveled lightly. Our passage begins with Paul outlining all the reasons he has to be confident in the flesh. He listed all the benefits he had by way of a privileged background, a good family, a good education, a good reputation amongst his peers, yet he says, "Whatever gains I had, I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and regard them as rubbish." He ditched all the stuff that we can haul through life because in Jesus Christ he'd found all that he needed.

He was traveling light on life's journey. What had brought about this dramatic change in Saint Paul was his discovery of the gospel of grace. He'd spent the first part of his life doing what he thought was the right and religious thing to do. He'd kept the law zealously; his religiosity had even led him to persecute the early Christians. But he'd come to see that what he called "this righteousness of my own that comes from the law", is not enough. There was nothing he could do to earn God's favor, no matter how hard he tried. The word righteousness means right relationship. So, what Paul found is that nothing he did brought him peace or put him in a right relationship with God. What he discovered was the gospel of grace. What he found there was a righteousness that comes not as a reward or a prize for our own efforts, but as a gift from God, the gift of grace. And we see that contrast in our passage. Paul draws a distinction between the righteousness of his own that comes from the law and the righteousness from God based on faith in Christ.

And this was the simple but powerful message that gripped Paul. This is what led him to toss away the baggage of his former life and to spend his time traveling around the Mediterranean preaching the gospel of grace. Paul wanted all his hearers to share his experience and the liberation that he felt. He wanted them to know Christ Jesus, to enjoy the right relationship with God that he could enter through grace in Christ Jesus. And the word he uses here, to know, in the sense of knowing Christ Jesus, is a very important biblical word found throughout the Bible. It's there in the Psalms, for example.

[The] Psalmist writes, "Be still and know that I am God." In fact, in the Hebrew scriptures, knowledge of God is presented as the chief end of humankind. Isaiah prophesies, "You are the servant I have chosen so that you may know me." Now, this isn't the same kind of knowing as in knowing that two plus two equals four. It's more in the realm of knowing a friend.

St. Paul would say that when he was living as a Pharisee observing the Jewish law in every detail, he knew about God, but he didn't know God. It was only when he accepted God's free gift of grace that he was brought into a relationship with God that through Jesus Christ he could say that he actually knew God. And I think we can see something of this distinction in that wonderful gospel reading that Rebecca just read for us.

Judas Iscariot takes offense at Mary's lavish outpouring of love and her gift to Jesus. Maybe it offended his sense of religious duty, the need to do the right thing. He thought that the money that Mary had spent on the perfume might have been better spent on the poor. Judas missed seeing Mary's act in a relational context, as an act of love and generosity. And we all have that tendency in us to objectify faith, to reduce faith in the living God to mere religion, a set of do's and don'ts and certain beliefs. Paul would encourage us to see the gift of faith as an invitation into right relationship with God and Christ Jesus.

Saint Paul felt so strongly about this, that he could sum up his life's mission in these five words, "I want to know Christ." He goes on, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." And he's not saying here that, "I want more and more proof that Jesus was raised from the dead. I want to be sure that resurrection actually occurred." No, what he's saying is, "I want to experience more of the power of that resurrection in my life."

Let me get back to the journey imagery. Paul knew where his journey was ended. He knew his destination, and to pack appropriately, you need to know where you are going. If you're lucky enough

to be going on a trip to Hawaii, you might only need sunglasses, a pair of shorts, and a few Reyn Spooner shirts. If you're going on a summer holiday to England, then you should pack all of the above plus long pants, a sweater, and a winter raincoat. Paul knew that his ultimate destination was heaven. He knew what was important to pack on his life's journey: "I press on towards the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ". Paul knew that he was heaven bound, that that was his ultimate destination.

The Bible doesn't tell us what the weather in Heaven is like. I imagine it's probably a bit like San Diego, but that's beside the point. What Saint Paul is encouraging us to do is to follow his example of his focus and his determination. He knew what was most important in life. He knew where he was headed. He ran life's race with purpose and determination unencumbered by the trappings and trinkets of this life that can so easily weigh us down and distract us.

So let me close by pushing my central metaphor as far as it will go and maybe a bit too far. Lent is a time to reflect on our journey through this life, and I think that in this passage from Philippians, Paul is encouraging us to think about the luggage we are bringing with us on that journey. Have we packed the right things? Have we packed light? Have we packed appropriately with our destination in mind? These are big, Lenten questions that we would all do well to consider. Amen.