

Reflection for October 4, 2020

Knowing Christ

“...I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ my Lord.”

...this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes...

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

Cornerstone of our faith, you are always there for us. In the midst of our grumbling, we yearn to find the strength of our convictions. In the course of our struggles, we long to soldier humbly on. We want to work gladly in your vineyard, without thought of reward or acknowledgement. Renew us in your compassion and grace, that our eyes may be opened to your presence and our minds may be filled with the very mind of Christ. Amen.

Cynthia Jarvis offers this intriguing description of Philippi: “It was a center for the imperial cult, a retirement community for veterans of the Roman army, and a city saturated in social hierarchies. Persons displayed worthiness by what they wore, where they were seated, the offices held, property and possessions acquired, and names chiseled on buildings or plaques. If Roman society in general had become the most status-symbol-conscious culture of the ancient world,...no region east of Rome was more quintessentially Roman in this regard than the colony of Philippi” (Connections, p. 343).

It is believed that Paul wrote the letter to the church at Philippi from a Roman prison cell where he awaited execution. It is a letter of consolation which in Paul’s world meant much more than grief; it included all forms of mental distress caused by death, poverty, exile, life without honors, the destruction of one’s country, slavery, illness, and blindness. “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8). Every now and then, we encounter words that electrify us.

“There may be times when the clouds of anxiety, sadness, distraction, and fear come between us and the radiance of Christ our sun, dulling his light and overshadowing the verdant pastures of our walk with him. Yet he is always there.

Even when we forget about him, we are constantly in his thoughts. There is no moment when his kindly gaze leaves us, or when we walk alone and unloved. We are constantly enfolded in his care, as our Savior and Lord, shielded from the power of forces which assail us” (Alister McGrath).

In what situations might we need to rediscover and draw upon the consolation of the assured presence of Christ amid the storms of our lives? In some ways, this is a very personal question, in that we have anxieties about many different things. However, the same principle holds; we need to hand over our anxieties to the living Christ and trust him for all that lies ahead. Some of us are anxious about the *future*. Some of us are anxious about *failure*. Some of us are anxious about *weakness*. How can we cope with all the challenges that are thrown at us? How can the Lord make any use of what seem to be very slender and fragile gifts? What happens if people ask us questions about our faith?

Here we need to learn to trust Christ. It is his gospel, and he delights in using weak and frail creatures in his service. We need to learn that it is not who we are, or even what we are, that matters to Christ in this respect. *It is what we allow him to do in and through us*. We must trust that Christ will be able to make use of what we can offer. In short: we must do our best—and let Christ do the rest.

Our anxiety here arises partly because we fear that we cannot even begin to do for Christ what he has done for us. We know that we shall fall short. We know the immensity of the tasks that need to be done, and feel that we cannot possibly meet the exceedingly great standards of excellence that he has a right to expect from us.

Now let us be clear that we do indeed need to strive toward giving our utmost for Jesus Christ. As Amy-Jill Levine writes: “Your ‘good’ could always be better. You may be the salt of the earth, you may be the light of the world, but your salt could be saltier and your light could be brighter. [Jesus] assures us that we are wondrous creatures with unlimited potential” (Sermon on the Mount, p. 2). Yet he is able to take and use whatever we can give him. The one who took a few loaves and fishes to feed the multitude can also take the lowly offerings we can make and do great and wonderful things with them. We need to trust totally that Jesus can use us, despite our weakness and frailty. “...*forgetting what lies behind*

and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

The short documentary *Knife Skills*, nominated for an Academy Award in 2017, tells the story of Brandon Chrostowski, owner and head chef of a restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio, called EDWINS. Mr. Chrostowski is a convicted drug dealer. He discovered for himself how difficult it is to get a job when you have a criminal conviction. Many employers simply reject any applicant with a record. So Chrostowski decided to open a restaurant with a mission: to give formerly incarcerated adults a foundation in the culinary and hospitality industry, while providing a support network necessary for their long-term success. Thus, EDWINS Leadership & Restaurant Institute was born.

Chrostowski struggled to get financial support for his venture. Many foundations thought his business model was too risky; turning convicted criminals into chefs and waiters seemed like a recipe for disaster. After years of rejection, Chrostowski finally cobbled together enough money to launch the Institute, and it has been a wild success. Since 2013, hundreds of people have graduated from the EDWINS program. It has a 97 percent employment rate and a 1 percent recidivism rate. The institute has won dozens of awards and is hailed as a new model for social entrepreneurship, but the statistics and awards do not tell the whole story.

The film follows a group of students from the first day of class to graduation. At first, the students tell depressing tales of poverty, incarceration, and rejection, but by the end of the course, there is a sense of accomplishment, pride, and hope. The final scene is the graduation ceremony, and one man leans to Chrostowski and says, “Thank you for believing in us.” No one wanted to invest in EDWINS, and now it is hard to get a table on a Friday night.

BrandonChrostowski does not claim to be Christian, and yet the work he does looks like the fruits of the kingdom. He often says, “Everyone has a past, and everyone deserves a future,” which is as good a summary of the doctrine of redemption as you can find.

“This was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.” God has given us wonderful gifts and entrusted us to make the most of them. In times such as this, it is essential that we remember for whom we are working.

Let us pray:

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with the knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:3-11). Amen.

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