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# I Want to Know Christ

Philippians 3.10-11

A Sermon preached online on July 17, 2023 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Tonight I have two friends in my mind. One's a young woman who's always felt her faith was second rate, and a huge disappointment to her parents. Her parents are the kind of people who seem to be on first-name terms with Jesus. When she sits in church, she feels like she does with her parents – this constant sense that God is talking to others and not to her. It's either unreal or it's unfair. So she's starting to stay away.

Another friend is a man a few years older. Faith used to fill his soul like blood fills the heart. It all made sense to him and shaped his existence. But just recently his faith seems to have been obliterated, as if his heart had been ripped out and he was struggling to get his blood round his body some other way. His friends are looking for psychological explanations, but he doesn't want one because he's already lost his present faith and some kind of psychological explanation makes him terrified he'll come to think his past profound faith was a fantasy too. And he can't bear to think that. What he had was as real as anything he'd known. It's just not there right now.

And I think of these friends when I look at chapter 3 of St Paul's letter to the Philippians and see something there that I believe gives both of them hope. Paul says, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.'

This is Paul, remember. Feel the tentativeness of it. 'I want to know Christ.' In other words, I don't yet quite know for sure. Now maybe for some of us that tentativeness instills a level of panic. Does that mean there's never been anyone, in the whole history of the church, who's known for sure? Is that terrifying? Or is it incredibly liberating? Does it, instead, make you think, maybe faith's not about being certain? Maybe it never was. Paul was a passionate man, but he doesn't exaggerate his faith. And listen to that last line – '...by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' There it is again. Did you hear that word '*somehow*' – 'if *somehow* I may attain the resurrection from the dead'? He's not 100% sure of his knowledge of Christ and he's not 100% sure of what Christ has in store for him when he dies.

Now I'm not going to blame you if you're finding what I'm saying deeply disturbing. The most successful brands of Christianity are those that make Jesus a handy device for material prosperity or inner peace or spiritual adventure or cultural dominance. But Paul is talking about something different.

Let's look at what precisely Paul tells us about Christ. He says three things. First he says, 'I want to know the power of Christ's resurrection.' If Christ wasn't raised from the dead the Christian story is a tale of doomed love, in which God makes one last pathetic attempt to win our love back. It's a story that ends in agonised failure on the cross. But if Christ *is* raised from the dead, if Christ is raised... then God's love is *not* finally in vain, *our* love is not finally in vain, agonising as it often feels, all that is done for love *will* finally become fruitful, death does *not* have the final word, hope really *is* the shape of tomorrow, all our pain and shame and regret *will* finally be redeemed, nothing is finally wasted, fear will finally pass away and joy will prevail, all will finally become beauty. That's the only power that finally matters.

Then second Paul says, 'I want to share in Christ's sufferings by becoming like him in his death.' Paul is talking about love. Paul is saying 'I don't just want to be the beneficiary of Jesus' resurrection. I want to enter into the very process by which the resurrection came about. I want to go into the heart of darkness with Jesus, that I may come to discover more wonderfully the splendour of light.' Think again for a moment of my friend whose previously profound faith had disintegrated recently. He knows what St Paul's talking about. He would rather walk through intense suffering, even face death, provided he knew he was close to the heart of God, than face the daily superficialities of life alone.

And then third this tentative possibility, Paul says, 'if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' That '*somehow*' again. Knowing Christ is knowing the power of his resurrection. If you know the power of his resurrection of course you'll take on his sufferings and even his death. It's more than worth it. And naturally you hope to receive the blessings of eternal life after your own death. *But even if you don't, it would still be worth it to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.* That's the heart of it all. Faith is precisely in this discovery: that to know Christ and the power of his resurrection is worth any suffering and is the heart of everything *whether it ends up with the gift of eternal life or not.* Jesus isn't a device to get you to something more important. There isn't anything more important than Jesus. Jesus is the heart of it all. That's what faith is. It's saying I want Jesus above all else and I'll take the consequences.

Jesus is God saying to each one of us, 'Your faith in *me* can be as tentative and diffident and fragile as may be, but my faith in *you* will never waver, not for one single second.' When God says this to you once, saying it again doesn't make it truer. God says this to us in Jesus. Now God's said it, it remains true for always.

I want to finish by talking directly to my two friends. To my friend who's always put off by other people's apparent certainty, I want to say, forget about how other people talk about God for a moment and just concentrate on this one question. Do I want to know the power of his resurrection? Not Do I *feel* it? – Remember not even Paul could say yes to that. No, the question is, Do I *want* to know it? Do I want to know that power more than anything else in the world? That's the only question that matters. If the answer is yes, all Paul's promises can still come true for you. If the answer really is no, you may be facing a loneliness that knows no end.

To my friend who's aching for the faith he's lost, I want to say, wanting to believe is believing. Yearning, longing, aching to believe is entering into the passion and pathos of God's love for the world- feeling for a moment what it feels like to be God. Faith begins where certainty ends. Don't let your grief paralyse you. Let it make you bolder, more dependent than ever on the power of the resurrection. And don't let your sense of God's absence isolate you. Jesus said, 'When did you see me hungry?' It sounds like you're the one who's hungry. Desperately hungry. Maybe it's time you let people see Jesus in you.

If you're like my two friends, feeling fragile in faith, even if you're joining the Companions, maybe especially if you're joining the Companions, take courage tonight. Paul's faith was tentative, as we've seen. But Paul found a way to make his longing to know Christ so infectious that it inspired all who followed. You can do the same. You don't need to hide your tentativeness and diffidence. Instead, do what Paul did, make that tentativeness and diffidence an inspiration to others. Paul's words and life became part of the Bible. By any standards, that's a big deal. But your life and words can be a kind of Bible to others, if you let your life say others, 'More than anything else, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and I'd face any sufferings and forgo any reward if all I could know was that.' Let your life speak. Let your life speak of your longing to know Christ. And let others, starting with these others on this call tonight, see the resurrection in you.