

'Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith' (Philippians 3:8-9)

If there is one man in the world that it is difficult to ignore at the moment, it is the current President of the United States. Like the leaders of most countries, and you can insert the leader of your own country here, no doubt, he makes the news everyday and I do not just mean that he appears in the newspapers and on our television screens, though he does both of these things, as well as popping up on social media. Few though have the clout of the President of the United States on a global level.

Interestingly though, this American President goes further. He actually makes the news. Everyday, it seems he is thinking aloud or pursuing or enacting some kind of policy that is new and quite often unsettling in order to bring about the conditions that he thinks will 'make America great again'. Whether they will all work or not is besides the point.

He then does what he thinks will bring his country to be the greatest institution in the world. That all this may at the same time satisfy his ego is a wonderful happenstance, I am sure. That his policies seem to bring about concern and uncertainty in world order, does not seem to concern him unduly. His concern seems to be the unwritten law of getting rich in money or political clout in any way possible and to the greatest extent. To be fair, he is putting into reality that which many other leaders might have dared to do but couldn't or, in the end chose not to.

Like him or loathe him Donald Trump reminds me somewhat of another group of men, equally zealous at all costs to put into practice to the letter, what was in their own Law; the Jewish religious leaders at the time of Jesus. So, with all the uncertainty going on in the world at the moment, just as it was then, the Apostle Paul pulls us back to that which was most important for him, in a time of difficulty and turmoil. It should be that which is most important for us, if we find ourselves in the same position anytime: the value of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ.

Whatever the situation of the world, be it in the grip of conflict, a pandemic, the grip of natural disaster or a financial recession, Paul concentrates on that which will save the soul from disaster; by comparing the worldly advantages that he had with the advantage of his relationship with God through Christ.

In doing so, he lists the things that qualified him as a good, God-fearing Jew, and zealous with it according to the Torah or the Law of Moses. What's more, if anyone else thought he or she top of the tree in the Jewish godly stakes, Paul states he is higher.

He was circumcised eight days after he was born, exactly as prescribed in the Law for one of the people of Israel, and of the tribe of Benjamin at that. There is significance here. Benjamin was not only a son of Jacob, called Israel, but along with Joseph, son of Israel's most beloved wife, Rachael.

When the kingdom of David divided after Solomon's death, it was the tribes of Judah and Benjamin that *reconstituted* the kingdom in Jerusalem. They then *restored* the kingdom in Jerusalem after exile in Babylon. And it was a Benjaminite alone, Mordechai who encouraged his daughter Esther to *deliver* the nation from destruction at the hands of Haman.

Therefore, being a Benjaminite made Saul, as he was known before his dramatic encounter with the Lord Jesus, a Hebrew of Hebrews. As to Jewish Law, Saul trained under Gamaliel, the best scholar in town. He became a Pharisee, as zealous to keep Jewish Law as he would be to deal with those he felt

deviated from it. Hence, he regarded himself as blameless in righteousness under the Law, and was a persecutor of the church, even to watching with approval the fatal stoning of Stephen. Oh yes, Saul had every reason to think he was doing the Lord's work for him. Thus, Paul, as he now is known as a follower of the Lord Jesus, would have recognised the parallel between the despots and those of financial influence he had previously known and his own present, changed-forever life.

Those, in positions of religious responsibility, as Paul was himself, knew the laws they followed and knew how to use them to achieve their own personal righteousness in the eyes of themselves and others, if not in the God they served. Theirs was a righteousness based on self-righteousness and self-satisfaction; in short, self.

But at this point the parallel stops. Despots and financiers the world over have eventually discovered that the worldly god of wealth and power is a false God. Paul only discovered this fact in an experience that completely changed his life on the road to Damascus. It was something so extraordinary, that when he compares all the achievements and advantages of his life till then against what he now has, he considers them as rubbish, of no value whatsoever. His was a conversion of everything his life up till then had taught him. He realised that his zeal for keeping the Law to the letter and, as he supposed, staying on the right side of God, actually only served to distance himself from God as he struggled to keep it.

He realised that he himself could not achieve salvation by his own merit, but only through faith by the grace of God. This completely changed his relationship with God through Jesus, the risen Christ. It was an earth-shattering moment for him, because he discovered in his personal relationship with God a joy that he could never gain keeping the Law.

And joy it is, as distinct from happiness. Happiness depends on our circumstances. Joy, as the Franciscan principles tell us, is the divine gift to us coming from union with God in Christ. It is still there even in times of darkness and difficulty, giving cheerful courage in the face of disappointment, and an inward serenity and confidence through sickness and suffering.

Writing his letter from a prison cell, he is joyfully ready, to undergo any suffering for Christ's sake, if by doing so it will make him more Christ-like. And the more Christ-like he becomes, the greater his assurance that he will attain the greatest prize; resurrection from the dead, to be with his Lord for ever.

However he met the risen Christ on that road, he knew at once that he had met the pearl of great price, all else he possessed had to go in order to claim this joy and treasure as his. It is a pearl however that he shares with each one of us who holds fast to faith in Christ.

I sometimes wonder why, with the blood of his own Son, God bails out the human race whose recklessness messed up his creation in the first place. But then again, God does not think or act as we do. God, through Jesus Christ, thought Paul was worth saving at great cost to God himself; the death of his son on the cross, so that by his resurrection, Paul would be forgiven his sin and offered a place in heaven.

The Lord also thinks we are worth saving at great cost to himself. Paul thought knowing Christ and finding joy in him was worth everything. What do we think about Christ our God?