Philippians 7 – Reward of Christ

Ex 19:3-6; Phil 3:12-4:1; Matt 13:44-46

What a great parable: It was one of our favourites in the children's picture book of stories that Jesus told: The rich merchant who finds the pearl of great price, and sells his furniture, his fridges and his freezers full of food. He sells his house, his fountain and his fishpond… and even his floppy hat with the feather which was his favourite!

I wish our reading had carried on to the parable of the dragnet, so that I could have told you about the ancient, decrepit and blind cod, which swam into the net of a kind-hearted Norwegian Fisherman, who released it. Unfortunately, being ancient, decrepit, and above all blind, it didn't learn its lesson, and managed to swim into the net of the same fisherman another ***34 times!*** Eventually the fisherman, tiring of throwing it back into the sea, arranged for it to be pensioned off in the local sea-life centre. Quite how I would have woven that in with the parable of the drag-net remains a mystery – both to you and to me…

Well, it's week 7 in our series on Philippians.

Last week, at the beginning of Ch 3, Paul was trying to warn against a besetting problem from the Jewish faith which was being imposed on the Philippian congregation. But in the second half of the chapter, Paul reconnects with the Philippians' Roman background, using two powerful metaphors from Roman life.

We have seen how Paul, who is in prison and writing to the Philippians who are experiencing some degree of persecution for their faith, has focused on the many reasons we have to rejoice – in our faith, in each other, and in our future hope.

And this future hope is caught up in Christ, who has demonstrated once-and-for-all that the ultimate weapon of the Roman Authorities – Crucifixion – is powerless against his Resurrection life.

This is Paul's hope. The hope he has passed on to the Philippians. The hope we have received in our turn. And as Paul has explained again and again, it isn't just a hope for the avoidance of extinction – it is the hope of eternal relationship with our brother and saviour – it is the hope of reconciliation with our heavenly Father

– it is the hope of peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And to this hope, Paul has given his life. As he said with passion in the verses we heard last week which immediately precede this paragraph:-
[10] I want to know Christ – and the power of his resurrection and to share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Who would not give his life for such a hope. As in the parable with which we began, it's a treasure of such great worth that it is worth any sacrifice.

As we have seen throughout Philippians so far, it brings joy to the darkest of prisons, and motivation for the greatest of endeavours.

In our very first sermon in the series, we looked at the start of the Philippian church, and saw how important Roman citizenship was to Philippi.

Philippi was a Roman Colony. Under Roman law, with the same status as an Italian city, speaking Latin and following Roman culture, some 30% of its population had Roman citizenship. Citizenship brought protection, status, connections and resources. Their eyes looked to Rome – for politics, rights, opportunities safety, and their place in the world.

But, in the end, says St Paul – what good is all of that? V19. ***Their destiny is destruction*** – for Rome cannot keep them from death; ***their god is their stomach*** – their appetites – the only thing Rome can satisfy; ***and their glory is in their shame*** – you just had to visit Rome to know that for all its power, its values were shameful and even its streets a stench. ***Their mind is set on earthly things***. And these things will not last. They are not the Pearl of Great Price.

So we must ask ourselves this – have we set our hope on the same things? On our possessions and status and what comes from our Passport & nationality? Earthly things which don't bear too much scrutiny and which won't last?

No – says St Paul in v 20. ***Our citizenship is in heaven.***

This is where your culture, your opportunities, your language, your laws and duties, your hope comes from.

This is the city to which our eyes are turned; this is the place of our birth and of our homecoming; this is the place we belong; and the place on which our eternal safety and hope is built. Continuing on in V20:

We eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

This is our destiny, our hope and our glory.

Now Public Games – especially the races and the gladiator combats - were very dear to the Romans. And so Paul picks up this second Roman image in V12-14.

Heaven is not just the source of our values and culture - it is where our crown is waiting for us! Which is of course why we give all the energy we have to making our way there.

At my junior school, there were four sports.

- Football, ankle deep in mud;
- Rugby when the ground was rock hard;
- Cricket, whose boundaries seemed a million miles away (for both batter and fielder).
- And ***The Foxhill Run!***

As second formers we lined the home circuit, waiting for that first runner to burst through the laurel lined arch from the woods; legs begrimed, brow spangled with sweat, he began a last gruelling lap. Yelling and cheering, we knew this to be the pinnacle of glory.

But as we later learned, the trail is long, and seldom downhill. At times it is boggy, dragging at the feet and sucking off the shoes. At times it is hard as concrete jarring legs, body and head. In the sun it is unbearably hot. In the rain it is just plain grim.

The worst stretch of all is a short steep downhill over tussocky grass which trips and twists; then a long, long uphill across a ploughed field, where the mud clogs and sticks and your trainers grow heavy and cumbersome. Somehow you have to keep going. One foot in front of another. However slow, you must not stop running: you must not walk - or you will never start again.

And then somehow, impossibly, you yourself are breaking out of the woods and on to the home straight. Cheering, clapping, waving hands flank your path - but there's no time to wave, to look for parents. With gritted teeth, conscious only of that finishing flag, those white ropes funnelling towards the line, you muster every last reserve. And then the relief, the release, the carton of cold juice pressed into your hand, the backslapping, and the sweet prickle of grass under your pounding head as you drop to the ground. And a quiet familiar voice out of the general din: "Well done. A good effort."

Which bit of the race do you feel you have got to now? A gentle downhill with friends cheering you on? Clambering over rocks and tussocks? Or the grinding slog alone up the muddy hill, with no end in sight? Wherever we are, we must go on. We must not dawdle or slow to a walk or give up in despair. Of course we must pace ourselves, but we must not stop. As Churchill said: ***Never give up, never, never, never***.

"Do you think I've got the Christian life taped," Paul asks in v12. "No. I'm miles off. But I've got my eyes fixed on that finishing flag - 'knowing Christ'. I have to put behind me thoughts of the past: when life was easy; the false starts and wrong turnings, the grim patches and the bits where I seemed to make no

progress. Instead I keep reminding myself what it's all about - breaking that line. That moment of unutterable joy when the King of Kings calls me up to the podium to give me my victor's crown."

And what will the crown be? What is the pearl of great price? This is eternal life – to know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Now we see as through a glass, dimly. Then we shall see face to face. Now I see in part. Then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

Shall we pray?