

Target-setting

5 10 14

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers,
of your people who call upon you;
and grant that they may both perceive and know
what things they ought to do
and may have the grace and power
faithfully to fulfil them.

Our text this morning is Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 3 and verse 14:

'I press on towards the goal . . .'

What goals do you set for yourself? What targets are you trying to meet? What is your aim in life? Over the last couple of years, one of mine has been to overcome my fear of water which largely I have done and now it's to swim a mile which I still have to do. What strikes me about today's passage from Paul's epistle to the Philippians is the image he has taken from sport, of a Greek or Roman athlete running, competing in a race and running, not in this instance to obtain the victor's crown of laurel leaves, then the equivalent of going for gold, but for Paul it's to be connected to God through communion with his Son, Jesus Christ.

And, of course, the question you could ask is: 'Fine, but how are we to do so?' In today's Psalm and in today's passage from Exodus, we have an example of how – to live the moral life. I love the image in Psalm 19 and verse 10 of God's Law, the

Torah, his commandments. Here, the Psalmist writes that they are: 'more to be desired than gold . . . sweeter far than honey'. What could be more valuable than gold, the precious metal that never tarnishes ? What could taste better than honey, sweet on the tongue ? And in Exodus 20, we have the Ten Commandments: the first four, our duty towards God; the second six, our duty towards each other. Yes, they are largely telling us what not to do but in framing the negative, the commands are opening up what could be so positive: a life with respect for God and respect for Man, avoiding the traps of wrong-doing which diminish not only those we wrong but ourselves, the wrong-doer !

Of course, keeping the Jewish Law was Paul's aim in life from a boy to a man. And he was jolly good at it too. Let me quote here Tom Wright's translation of Paul's boast in verses 5& 6: 'Circumcised ? On the eight day. Race ? Israelite. Tribe ? Benjamin. Descent ? Hebrew through and through. Torah-observance ? A Pharisee. Zealous ? I persecuted the church ! Official status under the law ? Blameless.' It reads like a tick list of all that a good Jew should be – completely clean, kosher, because he does what is right according to the Law.

But for Paul, the Christian, it's no longer enough. And why ? Because simply on the Damascus road, Paul has an encounter with God in the person of his Son Jesus which turns his life around. Paul meets the real thing in the flesh and nothing less than a love of Christ and a desire to do his will will ever be enough for Paul again.

So Paul has moved from the desire to be right before God by trying to keep God's commands to being justified by his faith in Christ and to try to do what is Christ's will for him. What is now important for Paul is not knowing the law but knowing Christ. In form by being informed.

So where are we ? We have the possibility of setting ourselves targets. We can try to live our lives by being moral. We can try to live our lives by faith in Jesus as the Son of God, as our friend and our saviour. We can try to put in sufficient effort that so that like a fully-fit, fit-for-purpose athlete, we may run the race and win the prize: communion with God the Father through the grace of his Son, Jesus Christ, and empowered by the presence of God the Holy Spirit in and with us.

Sounds like a great goal – so what do you think ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 30 : Target setting

