

Lord, as we learn how the early church in Philippi needed help from a distant prisoner, show us how to be inspired by Paul's approach to life. Amen.

How's your journey going? (Philippians 3.12-16; Lk 6.20-23)

How's your journey going? In case you are at a loss to know what I'm talking about, I'll repeat the question:

How is your journey going?

The prizewinning American poet, Carl Sandburg, once said: *I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way.* Perhaps you feel like that.

Other people have **more specific destinations** in mind. A tennis coach, Jamie McDonald, recently broke the world record for the **distance covered on a treadmill** in a week: 524 miles. When asked **How's your journey going?** he said *I didn't realise walking on a treadmill was so brutal. I call it the **dreadmill**. I will never, ever get on a treadmill again. It was my Dad who said **stick with it and just keep moving.***

Supposing someone had asked **Saul** (as he was then, before his conversion experience) **How's your journey going?** He would probably have said that he was very focussed, *still breathing out threats against the Lord's disciples* (Acts 9.1) and very pleased with the way his career plan was going – after all, he had just got letters from the high priest for the synagogues in Damascus, *so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, he might take them as prisoners*, (v.2).

Supposing someone had asked **Paul** that same question after his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road: **How's your journey going?** His letters give us some answers. The Christian life is a strenuous and serious business for Paul. It takes effort, stamina and purpose.

Paul doesn't just describe his own situation but **encourages the Philippians** as they strive to live as Christians yet as citizens of a Roman-administered society. Paul very much wants the Philippians to be part of the world while at the same time **standing out in a warped and crooked generation ... shining among them like stars in the sky** (Phil. 2.15).

A fortnight ago, Mike emphasised the danger of trying to ape the Jews as a way of earning God's blessing (Phil. 3.1-7). But there is **another, opposite danger**, thinking Jesus has done everything for us so we can sit back and do nothing. At the beginning of today's section of Philippians, Paul uses very strong words to say how hard he runs. But **he's not there yet**. He has plenty to learn as he wants to be more like Jesus. Whatever the race, a serious competitor can **never afford to be complacent**, without scope for further improvement. **Christian perfection (or maturity)** means knowing that you have not been perfected. Paul didn't specify particular shortcomings but we can assume that he considered himself morally imperfect as well as lacking in knowledge and abilities: ***Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*** (v.12).

Apparently there were some at Philippi who saw Christian life as reaching a plateau of perfection where all necessary development had occurred. **Paul recognised this disagreement**, saying it is a mark of shared maturity to know that you (and others) **do not run the race well** and need to follow Christ's example together: *All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you* (v.15).

What about us? Isn't it easy for us to spend most of our time thinking and acting as though we are perfect. Do we really believe (and act upon) **Jesus' analogy of the plank and the speck?** : *How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye" when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?* (Mt 7.4). We tend to work from the assumption that we are perfect and others are not.

Many people in the ancient Greek world took sport and fitness seriously, and New Testament letters often use **the athletic track as a picture of the Christian life**. It's a bit like references to football in present-day sermons!

Paul doesn't settle for an easy life but runs on and on, like a runner in the recent London Marathon. He says **I press on** (vv.12,14). He leans forward to reach the finishing line. Maybe you were intrigued by man whose **Big Ben costume** was too tall for the finishing line or you shared the disappointment of **Jessica Anderson**, the nurse whose outfit was initially disqualified for a Guinness record because she was wearing scrubs rather than a dress. But hopefully you didn't overlook the **mental and physical anguish** of competitors in a demanding race. Did you see the picture of the lady who

collapsed, semi-blinded, and had to be helped over the London Marathon finishing line?

And remember the **treadmill man**. He called his ordeal a dreadmill, but said *It was my Dad who said stick with it and just keep moving*.

Once started on the Christian road, you should **keep going and not waste the progress** you have made: *Only let us live up to what we have already obtained* (v.16).

No successful runner spends time looking back, or calculating how well he/she has done by comparison with others. Paul's advice to press on, not looking backwards, is difficult to follow, but so important. Don't we turn past mistakes over and over in our mind? There can be value in this, of course, if we can learn from the past and avoid making the same errors in the future. However, it is so easy to go beyond this rational reflection into an **unhealthy, endless focus on past problems** with the result that we **forget the one thing that really matters** (living for Jesus) and we find so many other things to do that we are **in danger of dropping out of the race**.

What do you find **hard to forget**? What's **getting in the way** of your Christian journey? **(PONDER / DISCUSS with someone near you)**

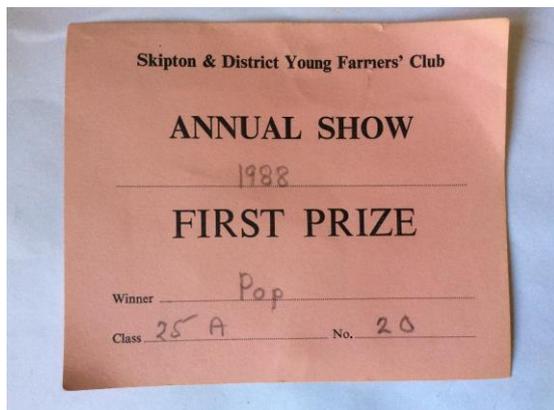
Paul counters this tendency to look backwards when he talks about **deliberately forgetting what is behind** – past achievements, past sins, past disappointments, past hurts. After all, **Jesus has wiped the slate clean** by taking all our mistakes and sins away on the cross: *I am he who blots out our transgressions and remembers your sins no more* (Isaiah 43.25). We have **not yet reached our goal** and we need to focus on the present, with the future very much in mind.

Paul has said a lot about the race, but he also **emphasises the prize that is his goal** – *the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus* (v.14). The true Christian attitude is pressing on to the winning post for **the prize of the full knowledge of God in Christ**.

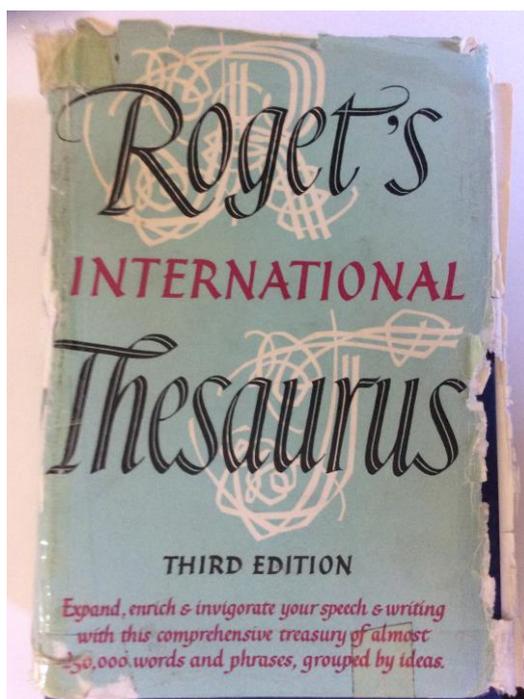
Have any prizes meant a lot to you?

- Who has ever won a raffle prize at some event or other?
- Anyone ever won a luxury holiday (or even a car) from a charity draw?
- I won't ask if anyone has won a lottery jackpot – they might find unwelcome visitors at their door!

- Any sports enthusiasts here with a display cabinet full of shining cups at home?
- As a small boy our son was really chuffed when his pet rabbit won him a few pence and a coloured certificate in the local Young Farmers' Club show.



- Who still has books awarded as school prizes in more affluent days? They often gather dust, but you can see that this one has been well used by my wife (I must confess that I tend to use an online crossword solver!):



These prizes come from pure chance or our God-given talents, but even the best of these prizes **fades into insignificance compared with the prize Paul is striving for - to be with Jesus for ever**. We are in the race together with our fellow-Christians; we help each other so that we can all get that prize. Won't that be wonderful?

As our Gospel reading puts it, however much we suffer, *we can rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven* (Luke 6.23).

We may not be physically up to the demonstrations of joy and relief at the boat race or London Marathon finishing lines or the end of a stage of the Tour de Yorkshire, but mentally we can still *rejoice in that day and leap for joy*. As Christians we can taste Easter every day, and set our eyes on the future, our full and final hope that is *resurrection from the dead* (v.11), *the prize for which God has called us heavenwards in Christ Jesus* (v.14).

So *How's your journey going?* I hope your spiritual journey is going well, and that unlike the American poet you can say *I do know where I'm going, and I'm on my way*.

How is your journey going?

This question was staring down at me on a London train last Wednesday. In fact, that particular journey went well, unlike the previous trip when our train broke down and we arrived two hours late! But it was the request underneath the question (again from LNER, not from Paul) that struck me as relevant to our Christian lives:

We would love you to tell us about it

Yes, we would love you to tell us about it. Perhaps you can talk to others about your spiritual journey over coffee, or perhaps better still with your neighbours over the garden fence.

Thank you, Lord, for inviting us to run with others in the Christian race. Help us always, we pray, to stick with it when times are hard and never take our eyes off the prize you have promised us. Amen.