

There is music at funerals that every clergy loves or hates. One that is of this marmite type is the Frank Sinatra hit, I did it my way. It sums up a life which is now complete, regrets and all. In some ways it's an accurate self-reflection of how many see life, but is it Christian?

Compared with today's Bible reading from Philippians – we're now in chapter 3, I'd say a definite no! And here's why... Paul is looking back over his life, just as in the Sinatra song, and Paul likewise knows his end is near. Or is it? Let's look at the passage in a bit more detail.

Previously...we compared our calling as Christians with Jesus calling as the eternal son of the Father, lowering himself to come to live and walk among us, and how we conduct relationships with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ bearing Christ's example in mind. He emphasised that Christ Jesus, equal with God, gave up his status, in order to die on the cross so that we can confess Jesus as Lord. Now here, Paul takes that discussion further.

- 1) **Status** – (v4b-8) Paul reminds his hearers about his background, his status. You couldn't get any better than this – he came from a privileged background, full of natural advantage, a good education – there's no mention in the new testament about Paul's parents but you can pick up from this that they wanted the best for him. He held Roman citizenship as well as Jewish ancestry. He was a pharisee – now I know that Jesus often had harsh words for them – but do you remember that Jesus also once said unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, in other words, they could be upright, law abiding citizens, following God's regulations down to the last letter, involving the smallest detail of daily life. He was so convinced passionately about this way of life that he persecuted the nascent Christian church because he saw the challenge they made to his holy way of life. (v6) He was confident in his calling... then he encounters on the Damascus road the Risen Lord Jesus. Everything changes. He, like a good accountant, writes a profit and loss account and finds himself in negative balance – all these achievements before Christ added up to a big loss (v7) All his efforts come to nothing, less than nothing. But on the other side of the balance sheet comes Jesus Christ. His religiosity, his heritage, his righteous acts cannot save him. Only a personal relationship with Jesus Christ can do that. Jesus is enough, more than enough. Paul cannot sing 'I did it my way' and feel satisfied. It leads to nowhere. But is all this looking backwards, to his conversion – no – v8 is best translated "I count". The glory that was his in Christ is still his in Christ. He has made progress along the way (v8) by knowing Christ Jesus my lord. What is true of Paul can be and is true for us too.
- 2) **Satisfaction** (v9-11). Do you ever say 'I did my best'. It's what we tell our children at exams time – just do your best. It's meant as an encouragement – but it often points out the times we didn't – we spent too long in front of the TV or computer, idling away the minutes... or maybe that's me, and my school reports that said 'could do better'! Paul now turns from facts to explanation. Why is the life of Christ better than our previous state or status? v9 begins to explain. Paul wants nothing more than to be found in him. When people look at him, he no longer wants them to see Paul, but Jesus Christ lived out in the life of Paul. Whatever his situation and wherever he might be, he will always be in Christ. And in Christ he finds a right

relationship, an eternal hope, and a living reality. He is right with God and what he considered righteousness before, keeping the Jewish laws, no longer have any value or purpose. He now lives, because of the righteousness given him by Christ Jesus, a life of loving service to Christ Jesus. This is freeing. It's no longer I've tried my best, or could do better, neither looking at our inner defections or failing to achieve a higher pass mark than we can achieve but resting in the love of Christ with an amazing end goal (v11) the resurrection already found in Christ, or in other words, the assurance of Eternal life.

- 3) Singlemindedness. (v12-16)** Paul cannot sing 'I did it my way' because even though humanly speaking he might be reaching the end of his life, he still presses on towards the goal, the prize which Christ has in store for all believers. Did you note that v13 begins 'brothers and sisters'? This is an important corrective for Paul himself just as much as for his hearers. Christian leaders can get so caught up with their church activities, duties, priorities and demands that they forget that they are still a child of God, and still need the support and encouragement of others within the fellowship of the Church. Remembering this, Paul concludes this section of the letter by encouraging himself, and those who read the letter, so that means us! Of a right perspective on the past – Paul talks about forgetting it...It's so easy to dwell on the past – for some that means remembering the good old days, when churches were full, when the world was easier, when life simpler. Or don't make the mistake of being weighed down by past sins and mistakes. By all means reflect on them, weigh up the truth of those memories, but don't let it dominate the here and now, or more importantly, the future hope in Jesus – this is what Paul presses on towards. He's not lost his original zeal, tempered though it had been by catastrophe, illness, persecution and imprisonment for the cause of Christ. Look instead, Paul says, to the goal that lies ahead. This requires determination – look at the words Paul uses – straining forward (v13) pressing on (v14). A quick question- which is the only sport where competitors stop at the finish line? (ideas – swimming!). He can see the tape, the finish, but he's not going to arrive there coasting or casually – no, he's going to arrive there determined. Paul does not, in fact (v14) tell us what the goal is, nor what the prize will be. He lets the whole compass of scripture speak to that – Christ's well done, the contrast between earthly strivings, sufferings and sacrifices and heavenly glory – the crown of Righteousness which awaits, summed up by Paul himself in 1 Cor 2:9 – 'no eye has not seen, no ear heard, no human mind conceived... the things that God has prepared for those who love him'

In summary, faith in Christ is a tough, challenging road, but we can be sure of our identity in Christ, whatever our human status, and the prize that lies ahead. Strive for that prize.

Prayer...Lord God, help us to know Christ, to press on towards you, to glory in our status as your beloved children. Amen.