

Philippians 1 v21 part two

εμοι γαρ το ζην Χριστος
to me for to live Christ
to me told us that this was something important to the writer
for told us that it was a thought out, lived out truth
to live was living in the here & now
and Christ was the reason, the beginning & the end of living
which brings us neatly on to:

και το αποθανειν κερδος
and to die is gain

And - Paul as usual is aware that there is more to life than the temporal here and now, there is the yet to come. Each day is a day closer to the coming of Jesus. We do not know when the exact day is but we cannot push it away and we must be prepared. I am not of the opinion that this day is in the immediate future but I am certain that even if Jesus doesn't come in the next thousand years I will have to face him a lot sooner in that I am destined to die.

As life never meant to Paul mere existence, so death, the opposite of life never meant non existence. To die Paul meant the separation of the soul from the body i.e. natural death. Death I am convinced is a taboo subject - sex used to be but is now talked about considerably more than dying.

I must admit that the one part of the ministry I was most concerned about doing was funerals and all the business around death. It was talked about little at college and watching a funeral is quite different to leading a funeral or being involved in a funeral when it is someone close to you. We need to talk about people when they are dead, it should not suddenly become a forbidden subject in case someone gets upset. Crying is allowed, one of the worst things we can do as human beings is keep emotions bottled up inside us. For most things there is a time and a place but when dealing with bereavement there is rarely an appropriate time and place in today's society unless one is by oneself. We do need to give ourselves permission to express deep felt hurts and losses in public without others feeling embarrassed or put out. I have learnt it is not the words one says in those situations but the feelings expressed in return. There are no easy answers but there can be reaching out as one human being to another with and in the love of Christ.

to die – like to live is better translated as dying – this is both in the future sense as in death itself but also is a process in which we are engaged at this very moment. Acknowledging this helps us to recognise our fragility and that this body is failing now & no cream or scheme will halt that process. But also we are engaged in that daily process of dying to self and taking up our cross and here we are gaining, benefiting – it is not just pie in the sky but here and now!

Notice again that there is no is, the word that comes after parallels the words before. To die gain it needs nothing adding, just stating and believing.

One gain is that we will no longer have the burden of living. Do not be ashamed of admitting that life is difficult, Christ never promised us an easy life, he said take up your cross daily and follow me! For Paul it was precisely because his life was so occupied with Christ, so totally given over to Christ, to doing the will of Christ that he found life a very heavy load to carry. They are the words of the very human Paul giving vent to a very human and universal sentiment: death is a gain to those whose life has become weighed down by almost unbearable burdens.

But for Paul we need to put these thoughts alongside the first part of the sentence - to live is Christ. He would never have renounced his allegiance to Christ merely to get rid of the burdens he had. I'm not sure he would have looked forward to the act of dying itself but he could and did look beyond it and saw the prize at the end of the race. This is in big contrast to the world view which often at best can only see death as a relief from suffering, Paul is saying yes it is but it can be and should be much more than that. In fact so much so that it is better to suffer and know Christ than the removal of suffering also remove Christ. Life which is Christ is thus not destroyed by death, it is only increased and enriched by death.

What an attitude, to so love the lord that he wants to be with him and yet also humble enough to allow God to use him while he waits. To understand that all of the finery of this life is as nothing compared to the gain of eternal life with and through Jesus Christ.

Just as the first part of this sentence helped us to work out our key priority while here on earth so the second half helps us to keep perspective. To be able to see this world with all its trappings for what they are – temporary blips, enjoyable, painful, but still just temporary. Sometimes we cling to earthly things as if they are permanent, we focus on the loss of others instead of realising this was the way it was meant to be and remember our own mortality. Let us not look on death as the great taboo but instead the great liberator and in that spirit we can join with Paul and say "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray – in the quiet listen to this story.

There was a young woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. So as she was getting her things 'in order,' she contacted her Vicar and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

They planned her service and the Vicar was going to leave when the young woman suddenly remembered something very important to her.

'There's one more thing,' she said excitedly. 'I want to be buried with a fork in my hand.'

The Pastor stood looking at the young woman, not knowing quite what to say.

The young woman explained. 'In all my years of attending socials and dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favourite part because I knew that something better was coming... like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance!'

The Vicar's eyes welled up with tears of joy as he hugged the young woman good-bye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he also knew that the young woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She had a better grasp of what heaven would be like than many people twice her age, with twice as much experience and knowledge. She KNEW that something better was coming. Amen.