

Reflections on Philippians 3:1–14
Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

This is a relatively uncomplicated sentence from the Apostle Paul, straightforward and easy to understand compared with some of his paragraph-length sentences in other Epistles. And yet, it is loaded with meaning, getting at the heart of the Gospel in one fell swoop. Contemplating this verse within its context and unpacking some of the words might enable us to glean insight and inspiration for our lives and for the *koinonia* (Christian community) we seek to be.

The knowing of which Paul speaks is intimate and personal. He has in mind fulsome, firsthand encounters with the sacred that deepen over time. As Thomas Merton said, we are invited to know Christ “not by hearsay *but by experience*” for “that is what makes all the difference.” This fulsome knowing is conveyed beautifully by Wendell Berry in poetry to his wife Tanya. In a poem from his series *The Country of Marriage*, Berry writes:

...I come to you
lost, wholly trusting as a man who goes
into the forest unarmed. It is as though I descend
slowly earthward out of the air. I rest in peace
in you, when I arrive at last.



Knowing in this way has the potential to be the making of us. It does indeed make a difference. Being in the world in this “unarmed” way opens us to experiences of Christ who is in everyone and everything. Gone are the distinctions between “religious” and “secular,” “holy” and “ordinary” for all people and things have the capacity to reveal God to those with eyes to see—a truth we will return to later. But let us first explore what Paul means by death and resurrection.

Religion has in many ways narrowed down these terms to a once-in-a-lifetime event—for Jesus and us. As Jesus died on a cross and was raised, so we, too, will die one day with the hope of being resurrected into a new life with God. But this is not the only event Paul is referring to here.

The so-called death of which Paul speaks is the laying aside of achievements, qualifications and acquisitions, the self-emptying referred to previously in the ancient hymn (vs. 2:6–11). In recalling his own Jewish pedigree, Paul says he is a Hebrew among Hebrews. But in order to become like Christ “in his death,” Paul counts all his gains as rubbish—literally excrement. He empties himself of power and status so that he might see more clearly the fulness of Christ within.

Those attributes and successes that are a source of pride and identity in the “gain” column of our life’s ledger can easily lead to a *self-righteousness*. That is, we wrongly believe that these “gains” are what earn our love and value—in the world’s eyes but also in God’s. Paul warns that this thinking is not in keeping with what is revealed in the gospel of Christ. He speaks strongly about our need to put such things behind us as we press on towards a more grace-filled leaning into God’s unconditional love and acceptance. The goal towards which we are heading is that faithful leap off the cliff, where in giving up the struggle to earn and prove, we find ourselves upheld and completely loved by the Sacred One within.

Our achievements and acquisitions are also the source of distinctions that can divide and exclude. Using circumcision as an example, Paul says viewing life solely through the lens created by our “gain” column, cuts up the Body of Christ. I experienced something of this when the Bay Area Minister’s (BAM) group wanted to organise an event for World Day of Peace. Given our joy at hosting together the Easter dawn service on the beach, we hoped to add this day to our repertoire of ecumenical activity.

The details were discussed over two BAM gatherings. Some wanted the focus to be on declaring Christ as the only way to peace. Some looked for an event that would highlight and pray for the injustice and lack of peace in our world. Others turned to familiar prayer books and litanies to form the basis of a more formal worship. In the end, the distinctions of our differing identities made finding a way to observe World Day of Peace too hard! I'm sure we could have worked it out with time and conversation, but when a member of our group experienced a death in his family, we found a legitimate excuse to abandon the project for now.



In contrast, Christ always unites. So, who is Christ within the relational dance of the Triune God? And what exactly does it mean to be *in Christ*?

Well, as Richard Rohr likes to say, “Christ” is not Jesus’ surname! Jesus was a manifestation of Christ but he was not all of Christ. As a man who lived in time and space, Jesus could not possibly comprise the fulness of Christ who is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation” and in whom “all things in heaven and on earth were created.”

Among the many implications for us, understanding “Christ” in this way means that Jesus was Christ, putting flesh and bone on the invisible God for us. But it opens the door for “Christ” to be found in other places as well.

Put simply, we might define Christ as *the physical manifestation of a spiritual God*. If this is so, then Christ has the potential to be revealed in the sea waves crashing on the rocks; in the rose opening and releasing its fragrance into the air; in the eyes of a stranger in the shop whose warm smile bridges the distance; in the precious story of a loved one’s day; in you and me and the *koinonia* we are together.

As one of my Spiritual Direction colleagues said, “I’ve never seen the face of God... except for those glimpses I get five thousand times a day.” Herein lies the possibility of resurrection. The word used by Paul which is translated as “resurrection” (vs. 10), occurs only this once in scripture. It is an emphatic word meaning *to experience the full impact of rising completely out of the realm of death*. No wonder Paul says he has not reached this goal yet!

If death is the laying aside of our “gains” and the self-sufficient often divisive worldview promoted by them, resurrection is being raised by God so that we are able to see the sacred everywhere.

Drawing again from the images in Wendell Berry’s poem, when we are *made alive in Christ*, we approach life and one another with an unarmed descent earthward. We *can* let go, lay aside, relinquish because we know *and trust* the One who holds us. From this humbler, grounded place, we come to view ourselves less and less by what is distinctive or in terms of the temporal gains that are passing away. Instead, our firsthand, daily even, knowledge of Christ everywhere awakens us to an inner unity that is our peace.

Now, as valuable as these teachings and reflections may be—or not be!—I am brought back to the simple passion in Paul’s profession: *I want to know Christ*.

As I was reminded during our Church Council meeting last week, this is the essence of *koinonia*. To know and speak of Christ is the yearning that brings us together, the aim that informs our worship and service in the world. Therefore, we would do well to sit quietly with these words and make them our prayer, letting them shape our hearts and the heart of the community we hope to become.