

Isaiah 43: 16-21  
Psalm 126  
Philippians 3: 4b-14  
St. John 12: 1-8

Lent V 2022.

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“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”

Philippians 3: 8a

Perhaps something like this has happened to you too: A few years ago on holiday, my wife and I were visiting a sister-in-law. We were sitting on her back deck on a beautiful summer evening, enjoying cold drinks. I happened to shift in my chair, and one leg of the chair slipped off the deck, and the chair and I toppled over before I knew what had happened... I was completely unhurt – the deck was built only a few inches above the ground -- but I looked absolutely silly with my feet sticking up into the air, my head on the grass, entangled in the overturned lawn chair...

Normally we trust, that if we're going to sit on a piece of furniture, it will bear our weight and sustain us – but we can't always be confident of that... Our trust may be misplaced – perhaps especially with a lawn chair near the edge of a deck. The issue is: Where do we put our trust?... Or, in whom do we put our trust?... For many people, their trust is misplaced or mis-directed...

We don't have the same tensions between Jews and Gentiles as the congregations did as the New Testament was being written, but it's evident that the Jewish Christians in these new congregations thought that they had a special status, because of their Jewish heritage. St. Paul takes them to task because they had The Law – all the directions about how to live – and yet these Jewish Christians *broke* the Law. Romans 2: 17 begins,

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law?

Even more sadly, the motivation for crucifying Jesus Christ was largely by religious leaders who regarded this young rabbi and his odd notions of the kingdom of God, and his casualness toward some of the cherished Law, and a potential rival to Rome, as a threat:

But one of [the Council members], Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’  
(John 11: 49-50)

So embedded in the psyche of some early people of faith was this sense of privilege because of their family backgrounds... They had a trust or confidence in their superior knowledge of God because of their ancestry...

St. Paul has no time for this: Of impeccable Jewish ancestry himself, he sees it all as worthless – because our status depends only on what *God has done* for us in Jesus Christ. We don’t put our trust in our ancestry, to be right with God...

In today’s second lesson, Paul explains it this way:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.  
Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

We don’t put our trust in our ancestry, to be sure we’re right with God... This still goes on today: One of the reasons being given to the Russian people to justify the recent invasion of Ukraine is an appeal to Russian national identity and their Christian heritage; and conversely, dismissing the value of the identity of the nation of Ukraine...

So, there is one important example of misplaced trust... But trust can be misplaced in all kinds of ways: A distant relation of mine has no time, she thinks, for living a life of faith. But she has an enormous blind trust in *science* – that science will solve all the world’s problems! (including a lack of compassion...) Others might put trust in their own natural capacities: “If I’m big enough; or strong enough; or spend enough money – I can overcome any problem which will come my way...” I respectfully suggest these are other examples of mis-placed trust...

One more example: To be our trust in a local Christian leader, or a single local church – even such a cool parish as St. Brice’s – I suggest is misplaced... Christian leaders (not least myself) are human, and will invariably fail, sooner or later.

By the grace of God, after death, after the Judgement, when we are united with Christ for eternity, then the Church of God (the whole catholic company, no doubt, with some surprising people included), then the Church will be perfect... But as important and wonderful as a local parish can be, being made up of people who are still learning how to love, we sometimes get it wrong...

Confidence in any group, or any human being (with one amazing exception: Christ), is always misplaced trust...

Rather, our trust, our confidence, needs to be in the God whom we serve. God by his very nature is perfect. He is our Rock, our Salvation (I Corinthians 10: 4). His Spirit dwells within us (II Corinthians 1: 22)... If we want to have a reliable trustworthy guide, let's develop this walk with the Lord, so we get to know him better...

Romans 12: 2 puts it this way: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Today's second reading puts it this way:

For [Christ's] sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 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.

Paul regards this as a prize above all others. Verse 14:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

We're in the midst of the season of Lent – a period when we're encouraged especially to take stock of ourselves, and our walks with Christ... I encourage us all – me as well as you – to consider where our trust lies. There can be many wonderful people in our lives. When they're used correctly, the lawn chairs won't tip off the deck. There are many things in life which provide order! But our ultimate trust and confidence needs to be in Christ, and we want to foster our relationship with him. In the words of the old hymn,

All to Jesus! All to Jesus! This my song shall ever be  
You our only hope, our Saviour, yours the love that sets us free! Amen.