

I Corinthians 15:58 Keeping our eyes on the goal

Introduction

At the start of each New Year many people commence with a resolution to make some kind of change to their lives. In my local gym I overheard a short bit of a conversation between two staff members who were joking about the forthcoming New Year rush of new people into the gym determined to shift a few Christmas pounds! It lasts for a few weeks but the majority of the newcomers will have quietly laid their pledge aside by the time we enter February because the effort of regular exercise becomes either too difficult to do or too difficult to fit into an already crowded schedule. But for whatever reason numbers in this facility will settle down within a few weeks into broadly the same people carrying out their exercise routines as usual.

What about the Christian Church –us? How do we begin a New Year? There is no requirement to create a New Year’s resolution. This is a cultural fashion that some people follow and others disregard at this time of year. However, the words of the apostle Paul in our Verse for the Year are ones to obey from January to December every year; and not just when we are in the mood to obey them. We can during the time we have off over the Christmas and New Year period give a few moments to reflect on how we are getting on in our Christian lives. Are we progressing as we should? Do we need to make some adjustments to our schedules? It is never a bad idea to reflect on the previous twelve months in our journey of faith – and indeed on the year as a whole. There will be for most of us things we recall with pleasure and satisfaction as well as other things we wish had not happened or had taken place in a different way. There will also be circumstances through which we have grown as people or as Christians. The particular setting of that experience might not have been something we wanted to go through, yet God met with us through it and enabled us to grow closer to Him. The text of our verse for the year comes from Paul’s first letter to the Church at Corinth. It is a powerful exhortation at the end of a lengthy epistle, immediately prior to his concluding remarks. Paul states: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain* (I Corinthians 15:58). What do you and I need to hear from these words? What do we need to apply to our lives from his challenge to us?

1. The command to obey

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you (I Corinthians 15:58a) (a) ***Therefore***... This verse is the summary conclusion to the whole of I Corinthians 15, a long chapter that explains very clearly the solid ground on which we stand in believing the good news of the Gospel of Jesus. It is not the wishful thinking of a few religious people, but the extraordinary revelation of God to more than five hundred people in the six weeks following the crucifixion, death and bodily resurrection of Jesus that first Easter. This was a large group of people –none of whom we expecting this event to take place but whose lives could never be the same again once they had encountered the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The list concluded with the writer of this letter Paul himself. By way of personal testimony it includes every genuine believer who has encountered the risen Lord Jesus by faith and experienced His love and mercy in their lives in subsequent years. It raises the obvious question: Have you met with the risen Lord Jesus by faith? Have you acknowledged Him as your Lord and Saviour? Have you taken that step of faith away from living for self to living for God through Jesus? There would be no greater way to begin this New Year than to do so by

committing your life to follow Him. The good news of the Gospel is of course to the world in general as whosoever wishes to reach out by faith and accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour can do so when prompted and enabled by the Holy Spirit, but it is the responsibility of each individual to take that step – have you done so?

Paul spends the majority of this chapter talking through the extraordinary significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He challenges other views that denied the bodily resurrection of believers who have left this life, because by definition if Christian believers are not raised to life again after death then it naturally calls into question the resurrection of Jesus! If that event did not happen then the gospel he and we proclaim would not be true. The vast majority of religions could not be shown to be true or false in terms of an evidence test. By contrast with Christianity if the events of the first Easter had not happened then Christianity could not continue. But many great minds have failed in their attempts to dismiss the credibility of the accounts of that first Easter. Too many eye-witnesses could give personal testimony that Jesus was dead but they met with Him on or after Easter Sunday. A case in a court of law may succeed on the testimony of one credible witness, but when there are more than five hundred who can testify to an event taking place then –in terms of legal proof- the burden of responsibility is on those who deny the event has taken place because the evidence is overwhelming as Paul has made plain in I Corinthians 15:1-8. What is the direct link to our text? It is that we can be certain in our convictions about the fundamental truths of Christianity. A person may choose to hold to different convictions – and we uphold the right of each person to have personal liberty to decide their own religious or secular convictions – but this does not mean that we accept each viewpoint or perspective is equally valid. The world in which the Christian Church began was extremely pluralistic in religious matters, but Christians insisted that Jesus alone was Lord and worthy of our sole allegiance. There were times when many gave their lives rather than deny their precious Lord and Saviour. If there is a risk of loss of liberty, possessions or life itself then a person would want to be sure their convictions were securely grounded. The apostle spends the whole of I Corinthians 15 to give the reassurance that our faith in Jesus is absolutely based on sure and certain ground.

(b) **my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm.** There is a time and a place for being open-minded, listening to other points of view. All of us will have more to learn on any subject we can care to name. However, there are foundational convictions we hold on a range of topics that are non-negotiable. We are absolutely certain they are true and build our worldview and convictions about other things in the light of the implications of the things we are convinced are true. No subject whether Arts or Science could exist without some assumed convictions on which current explorations are grounded. Paul is absolutely clear that the physical death and bodily resurrection of Jesus after His crucifixion on that first Good Friday is the factual bedrock of Christianity. We must stand firm on these truths. Our future life beyond this life is linked directly with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because He rose again from the dead so will we; because He has been welcomed into the Father's direct presence so one day amazingly will we. The practical blessing of these truths is never more useful than in the latter days of the life of a believer who can be assured of the wonderful things that await them beyond this life. It is equally the case that we can urge someone who has yet to trust Jesus to do so while they can because this wonderful future Jesus has planned for us is only for those who have embraced Him as Lord and Saviour. The gospel truly is good news but we must receive this amazing gift by faith to benefit from it. Have you done so yet?

(c) **Let nothing move you.** Paul made this point in his letter to the Church at Colossae. In Colossians 1:21-23a: *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.* ²² *But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation –* ²³ ***if you continue in your***

faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. The whole purpose of Christian discipleship is to ensure we are properly grounded in the faith. In Ephesians 4:11-16 the apostle Paul explained this purpose in this way: *to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*¹⁴ *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.*¹⁵ *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.*¹⁶ *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.* However, we will grow in knowledge and Christian maturity by both studying God's Word to know it better for ourselves and through Christian service which includes not only ministries through the local church, but also in many other social contexts where our convictions can be applied to the way we work, conduct ourselves on the sports' field or terraces or model the qualities described by Paul as 'the fruit of the Spirit' in our relationships with other people in other settings.

In 2017 do I need to refresh myself by doing one of the discipleship courses the church offers? Or some other form of training for Christian service? In 2017 do I need to offer to get more involved in some ministry or ministries? Maybe you took a step back in 2016 from commitment to significant church work – is it time now to get more involved in the work as we enter the New Year. We have a command from God's Word to obey –how many you and I best do that as we commence another year of Christian service?

2. The calling to follow

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord... (I Corinthians 15:58b) Paul has given an exhortation about what we ought not to do as followers of Jesus, now he puts it positively: *Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord...* (I Corinthians 15:58b); what does this mean in practise for us? (a) **Our priorities** At its heart it speaks to us about our priorities; We have an extremely lengthy list of options as to how we use our time outside of the time for work that is essential for paying the bills. The bad news is that for many people the 'other' time is more limited than we would like and choices have to be made. Sadly for too many people, even some Christians the Lord gets squeezed out of our schedules, or gets 'whatever is left over' when it comes to priorities. Work whether waged or voluntary is something God ordained for human beings as a core feature of our lives. Paul was very blunt about the sin of idleness on the part of people who could hold down jobs but choose not to do so (See I Thessalonians 3:6-10). This is very different from the modern predicament of many young people wanting to work and having a real struggle to find meaningful employment. In this case we must do all we can to encourage them until they are successful in finding appropriate positions. The tragedy in sinful human society is to value some relatively peripheral jobs in various forms of entertainment and sport with excessive salaries and reward those who undertake some of the most demanding but essential care-related jobs with the minimum level of salaries. Care for people in our own families is likewise essential. It was a required characteristic for potential church leaders -See I Timothy 3:4-5: *He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect.*⁵ *(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?).* However, the hardest choices for many people lie in what they can fit into the remaining hours left in their week, apart from sleep!

As you look back over the last year could you say that you have fulfilled what Paul was asking here in this verse? *Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord...* (I Corinthians

15:58b). It was a challenge given to an early Christian congregation where too many of the members could not say that this was the case for them. What would Paul want to advise us today? First of all he would want us to make it a priority to start the week in God's house with His people each Sunday. The author of Hebrews made this appeal: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching* (Hebrews 10:25). It is also very beneficial to spend even a very short time reading God's Word and praying as we start or finish the day. Different times will suit particular people, but there are plenty of types of Bible reading notes available that many Christians find helpful. We can be particular about ensuring we have good diets with the right amount of various kinds of food; we can be committed to physical exercise each week for our bodily wellbeing; this is good, but may we be equally concerned about regular spiritual investments in our lives. (b) **Christian service** The work of the Lord can take many forms some in public and other ministries most definitely in private. I thank the Lord for the many members of this congregation who have been dedicated in their service in their range of ministries from working with crèche and toddlers right up to serving the elderly in residential homes and all things in-between. I want to acknowledge everyone who offered their time and abilities last year. However, this is a New Year that has begun and with our extension at Panmurefield due for completion by the middle of the year we will have potentially more opportunities to use our talents creatively in pointing people to Jesus. Paul wanted his readers to commit themselves to serving the Lord as he most definitely was doing. Hebrews 10:24 states: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.* These words are very similar to Paul's exhortation in Galatians 6:9: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* In 2017 is God's challenge to you to start committing to involvement in a new form of ministry or to continue serving in the same ministries as last year, but consciously in our hearts dedicating this New Year to the Lord. There are always plenty of things we cannot do- but what can I do for the Lord this year is the question we need to answer! The apostle's exhortation *Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord...* (I Corinthians 15:58b) is a challenge once more to dedicate ourselves in His service. There are public ministries of evangelism and community service as well as work that is age-specific on Sundays and during the week. However, there is also much that goes on behind the scenes in pastoral care. I thank the Lord both for the pastoral team officially appointed to watch out for the people on their lists, together with others who make a point of caring for particular individuals who need assistance, and for each one of us who pray regularly for our fellowship whether in prayer ministries or in private prayer times. It is a team effort and everyone is needed to play their part.

If you stop and look carefully you can see a pattern at work. As we step out in faith and go forward for the Lord He opens doors of opportunity for us as we can see in the last few years. In addition, we have faced financial challenges because additional opportunities come with a requirement for additional expenditure. Is this an area where God is speaking to you on the threshold of a New Year about increasing your financial giving to ensure that the costs on ongoing ministry are met? Those with good memories of AGMs will remember our treasurer reminding us on many occasions that the budget required is greater than the projected income – yet equally we remember his reports that the money needed to pay our bills has come in. For those who have made sacrifices to ensure this is the case I want to say how much your generosity has been appreciated. Too often we can forget that our planned financial giving is a part of what the apostle had in mind when he stated: *Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord...* (I Corinthians 15:58b). Whatever it may be as the Lord leads may we always be wholehearted in our service for the Lord Jesus.

3. The conviction to remember

...because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain (I Corinthians 15:58c). Paul will conclude the letter with similar language with which he began I Corinthians 15. *Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. **Otherwise, you have believed in vain** (I Corinthians 15:1-2).* However, Paul has reminded them of the solid ground on which they stand. The death and resurrection of Jesus are facts of history to which there are an incredible number of primary witnesses. It really happened. Now that we know this is true- because He has been raised from the dead we too will conquer the barrier of death by physical resurrection to spend eternity with Him. Sin and death and the devil will all be vanquished in God's new creation after this life. Life has its joys and delights but many frustrations and times of tears. The exciting thing is that unlike an Agatha Christie thriller we know the ending well ahead of the final scene. Jesus has won the victory. He is our coming King. In John 12:32, are words spoken a few days prior to His crucifixion when He made this prophetic statement about the significance of His forthcoming death: *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.* ³³ *He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die.* It was a declaration that people from every ethnic background would come to faith in Him. In Revelation 7:9-10: *After this I looked, and there before me was a **great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*** ¹⁰ *And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'* Have you joined the winning team? If not will you take that step of faith today?

However, for all this to come to pass we have a calling to fulfil. Jesus asks each one of us to be His disciples who walk in His footsteps giving our very best for Him - will you answer the call? In John 4:34-36 Jesus told His surprised first disciples this message: ³⁴ *'My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work.* ³⁵ *Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.* ³⁶ *Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.* What are your expectations of people coming to faith in Jesus through your witness, our witness, in 2017? What are your expectations as a Christian of taking new faith steps in 2017? May God help us to be people of faith and expectancy, for Jesus sake, Amen