Living Faithfully as a Christian
Philippians 3:4b–14; Matthew 21:33–46

What does it mean to live faithfully as a Christian?

It is a question that sounds simple, but perhaps becomes more complicated the longer we have been Christians.

When we are new to the faith, we might think faithfulness means learning. We learn the stories of Scripture, the prayers, the hymns and the practices of the Church. We discover what Christians believe and how Christians worship.

But after many years, we can begin to measure our faith by what we have accumulated: how long we have been coming to church, how many times we have read the Bible, how much we know, how many committees we have served on, how many years we have given to the Church.

And all those things can be good. They are gifts. They are part of the inheritance we have received.

But today's readings ask us whether those things are actually the heart of Christian faithfulness.

Paul certainly had plenty of religious credentials.

He tells the Philippians that he was circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. As to the law, he was a Pharisee. As to righteousness under the law, he was blameless.

If anyone could claim to have got religion right, Paul could.

And yet Paul says that all of these things, which once seemed so important to him, have become secondary compared with knowing Christ.

He writes:

> “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection…”

That is a remarkable thing for someone who already knows so much.

Paul doesn't say, “I've learned everything I need to know.”

He doesn't say, “I've been a Christian long enough.”

He says, in effect, *I still have further to go.*

“I press on,” he says, “because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

That is perhaps one of the most important things we can hear from Paul.

Christian faith is not a qualification that we eventually complete.

It is a relationship in which we continue to grow.

There is always more of Christ to discover.

There is always more of ourselves to surrender.

There is always more of God's love to receive and more of God's purposes to discover.

Paul can look back with gratitude at everything that has brought him to this point, but he doesn't live by constantly looking backwards.

He presses on.

And then we come to Jesus' parable of the vineyard.

It is a difficult parable because it contains violence and rejection. But underneath the story is a very simple idea.

The landowner plants a vineyard, puts a fence around it, builds a wine press and a watchtower, and then leases it to tenants.

The tenants are given something that doesn't belong to them.

They are entrusted with the vineyard.

And for a while, that is what they do.

But eventually something changes.

They begin to behave as though the vineyard belongs to them.

When the owner sends servants to collect the produce, they beat one, kill another and stone another.

Finally the owner sends his son, and they kill him too.

The problem is not that they have been given too little.

The problem is that they have forgotten that what they have been given is **entrusted**, rather than **owned**.

And I think that is where this parable speaks very powerfully to the Church.

Because there is a temptation, particularly in a long-established church, to think that what we have inherited belongs to us.

We inherit buildings.

We inherit traditions.

We inherit liturgies and hymns and ways of doing things.

We inherit stories of people who have gone before us, people whose faith and generosity built the church we now enjoy.

We inherit congregations and ministries and relationships and communities.

And we should be deeply grateful for all of that.

But none of it belongs to us.

The Church belongs to Christ.

The gospel belongs to Christ.

Our buildings belong to Christ.

Our gifts and abilities belong to Christ.

Even our faith is ultimately something we have received.

We are tenants in the vineyard.

Stewards, not owners.

And stewardship means asking a different question.

An owner can ask, “What do I want to do with this?”

A steward asks, “What does the owner want me to do with this?”

That distinction matters.

Because sometimes faithfulness can become confused with simply preserving what we have received.

We can begin to think that the task of the Church is to make sure that nothing changes.

But Paul gives us a different picture.

Paul honours what he has inherited, but he does not remain trapped by it.

He counts all his previous credentials as loss because he has discovered something greater: Christ himself.

And he keeps moving forward.

This doesn't mean that the past doesn't matter.

Quite the opposite.

The past matters enormously.

We are people who have received a faith handed down through generations. We didn't invent Christianity. We didn't write the Scriptures. We didn't create the Eucharist. We didn't establish the Church.

We received these things as gifts.

But receiving a gift creates responsibility.

The question is not simply, **“What have we received?”**

The question is, **“What are we going to do with what we have received?”**

That is the question the vineyard poses.

What fruit will this vineyard produce?

And perhaps that is a useful question for each of us personally.

What fruit is my life producing?

Am I becoming more loving?

More generous?

More patient?

More courageous?

More attentive to the needs of others?

More willing to forgive?

More willing to trust God?

More willing to step outside what is comfortable in order to follow Christ?

Because Christian maturity is not simply knowing more about Christianity.

It is becoming more like Christ.

Paul doesn't say, “I want to know more *about* Christ.”

He says, “I want to know Christ.”

And knowing Christ changes us.

It changes the way we see ourselves.

It changes the way we see other people.

It changes the way we use what we have been given.

It changes the way we understand the Church.

And it changes the question we ask about our future.

Instead of asking only, “How can we preserve what we have?”, we begin to ask, “How can what we have received become fruitful for God's kingdom?”

That is a particularly important question for the Church today.

We live in a time when the Christian Church is changing.

Some things that once seemed secure are no longer secure.

Some of the ways we have traditionally done things no longer reach people in the way they once did.

And that can make us anxious.

But perhaps the gospel invites us to see this not simply as a threat, but as an invitation to faithfulness.

Paul says:

> “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal…”

Paul isn't despising his past.

He is refusing to let his past prevent him from following Christ into the future.

And perhaps that is what faithful Christianity looks like.

Not abandoning the past.

Not worshipping the past.

But receiving the past as a gift and allowing God to use it to create something fruitful in the present.

We are not the owners of the vineyard.

We are the people who have been entrusted with it for a time.

And one day, we will hand it on to others.

So the question is not simply whether we have kept the vineyard intact.

The question is whether it has borne fruit.

Whether people have encountered Christ through us.

Whether people have found a place of belonging.

Whether people have grown in faith.

Whether people have discovered hope.

Whether those who are hurting have found compassion.

Whether those who are searching have been welcomed.

Whether those who have become discouraged have discovered again the faithfulness of God.

That is what fruit looks like.

And perhaps the wonderful thing about both these readings is that neither Paul nor Jesus leaves us with the impression that we have to accomplish this through our own strength.

Paul says, “I press on because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

We don't press on because we are already good enough.

We press on because Christ has already taken hold of us.

The vineyard is not ours to save.

The Church is not ours to rescue.

The future is not ours to control.

We are called simply to be faithful stewards of what God has placed in our hands.

To know Christ.

To keep growing.

To keep listening.

To keep responding.

And to bear whatever fruit God enables us to bear.

So perhaps the questions for us are quite simple.

Am I still pressing on towards Christ?

Am I still willing to be changed by him?

And **what fruit is God inviting my life to bear?**

And perhaps, as a church, we might ask the same questions.

Are we still growing in our knowledge and love of Christ?

Are we building up the community of Christ?

Are we sharing the hope we have received?

Are we using what has been entrusted to us not simply for our own benefit, but for the sake of God's kingdom?

We have received much.

We have inherited much.

And we have much for which to give thanks.

But the vineyard is not ours.

It belongs to God.

And Christ is still calling us forward.

There is more of Christ to discover.

There is more growing for us to do.

There is more love to share.

And there is still fruit for the kingdom to bear.

So, like Paul, let us press on towards the goal, trusting that the Christ who has called us is the same Christ who holds us, leads us and transforms us.

And may the vineyard entrusted to us bear fruit—not for our glory, but for the glory of God.