

I want to begin my sermon with an observation, and that is that this week, as I've looked at the lessons set for the day, they seem to have an added poignancy, given what's going on in the Middle East. So, for example, on Wednesday at our noon service, there was a reading about something that happened on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. And in today's reading from Isaiah, you may have noticed a reference to the blast of the ruthless, which was like a winter rainstorm. And what happened in Israel last weekend was indeed a blast of the ruthless. And that part of the world has been afflicted with ruthlessness since biblical times, and so let's continue to pray for all those who suffer as a result of war.

I won't say any more about that passage from Isaiah. I'll return instead to the Book of Philippians, and you might remember that we're going through that great book. We're about halfway through now. We get to chapter three, and this is a very, very rich passage. There's any number of sermons one could preach on those verses, but I want to focus on what Saint Paul says on the subject of values. This seems to be something about which he has much to say. It's important for all of us to have a clear sense of what we value. Businesses love to advertise their values. You go into any business now or shop, and they'll say on their door, "our story" and "our values". And no doubt, some of them have paid very large amounts of money to a consultant to help them articulate their company's values. But whatever it is that helps is good. Churches, we should articulate our values a bit more often, I think. As individuals, we should definitely think about what it is that we value.

One thing we might notice is that our values change over time, which is why I think it's good to take stock of them every now and again, to see, to check in, to see where things might have changed for us. My college does that in England, does what's called a gaudy, every 10 years. So we all go back, get dressed up, and see people. And it's fun not just to see my mates, but actually the people I haven't seen for 10 years. They're the ones it's really interesting to talk to. And I've noticed over

the years, sadly there's been quite a few of them now, I'm so old. But I've noticed that people change over time, and part of that change, a big part of that change, is what they value. So, I've noticed that some of our earlier gaudies were very competitive, and we were all very concerned about status. Well, thankfully that's gone over the years. And neither do we seem to care what other people think about us, which I find terribly liberating. Our values change over time.

And what we see in Saint Paul's story, and what he's writing today, is that his values certainly changed over time. But for him, it wasn't a slow process, taking stock every 10 years or so. His values changed overnight. He writes elsewhere about what changed his life was that dramatic encounter which he had on the road to Damascus with the risen Jesus. That changed his life. One of the reasons it changed his life was that his values were turned upside down. Things he'd valued when he was in his early life were completely changed. That's what he's writing about in this passage.

Up to that point, when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, what he most valued were things like his family background, he said he was from the Tribe of Benjamin; his education, he was a well-educated Pharisee; his religion, he said he was zealous in his pursuit of his faith. He called these things "reasons to be confident in the flesh". They were all material things, not spiritual things. And I think we can all relate to that, to the value we put on material things. But after meeting the risen Jesus, everything changed. His values were turned upside down. "Whatever gain I had," he said, "I come to regard as loss. I regard them as rubbish." A note here that the Greek word he used for rubbish is not quite as polite as in the English translation.

I was reading an article recently about luxury homes, and I read about a software billionaire who started building a \$40 million home. And on inspection, it was discovered that the pine sidings in this new home were so vulnerable to decay that it had actually started to rot before the house was actually finished. And the point of the article was

that buyers can often mistake luxury for quality. And experts in the home building industry say that what most buyers agonize over are the wrong things. So, they'll want gold faucets, a very glitzy chandelier, and a flash staircase in the lobby, but those aren't the right things to buy in a house that's really of value. When the tornado comes, one might value the foundations more highly than the faucets.

So, Saint Paul's values changed dramatically. He'd say he came to value the right things. He came to see what was of true worth in life. "I regard everything as loss," he says, "because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord." Knowing Jesus trumps everything. He came to see that as more valuable than anything else. And Paul's drawing on a rich, biblical theme here. We read in the Psalms, "Be still, and know that I am God." And God says in Hosea, "I don't desire sacrifice, but knowledge of me." In the Old Testament, knowledge of God is presented as the chief end of humankind. Isaiah prophesied, "You are the servant, and I have chosen you so that you may know me."

And the Hebrew word which is being used here for "to know" is "yada", which has a broad range of meaning. And it definitely includes the intimate, emotional side of knowing. After all, Adam, as all schoolboys know, knew Eve in the garden. This knowing is not a knowing about. "It's not knowing about me," Paul's saying. "It's knowing me." It's not in the realm of two-by-two equals four, kind of knowledge. It's more in the realm of, "I know my friend." It's not knowledge of an abstract concept, it's a knowledge that comes in the context of a relationship. And before I go any further, I need to say that knowing God is inevitably much more complex than knowing my friend, just as knowing my friend is more complex than knowing easy sums. The more complex the object, the more complex is the knowing of it.

Saint Paul came to realize that, as a zealous Pharisee, he'd known about God, but he didn't really know God. Living a religious life, following the rules, is all that he was doing. He wasn't living a

life of faith, developing a relationship with God. That's the great change that happened in his life. What we see in this passage is that Saint Paul was all-in for Jesus. Our values determine our action, and that comes across clearly in Saint Paul. "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." And Paul's drawing on the language of track and field here. They were used to knowing the Olympic Games and things, and that's the language he's using here, the pressing on and the prize, they're athletic goals. And he's conjuring up an image of 400-meter runner coming round the final bend in second place, and there's somebody ahead of them, and they see the line in front, and they press on. They strain towards the finish line to come in first.

Is that an image that we'd feel comfortable using to describe our spiritual life? Straining, pressing on towards the finish line? Saint Paul encourages us to press on, to be clear about what our values are, and then to convert those values into bold action. So, I encourage you this week to take five minutes to list your top five values, and then to ask yourself, "Are those the top five values that I'd really want to be my top five values?" And then to ask yourself, "Am I living out these values? Am I pressing on to make sure that these values determine what I do?"

Amen.