

KEEP ON KEEPING ON (Lindfield 7th April, 2019)

PHILIPPIANS 3:4-14

In many Self-Help books and “Achieving Your Potential” workshops you will often read or hear of perseverance sayings: *when the going gets tough – the tough get going or quitters never win and winners never quit*. Persistence does make sense in many circumstances. But every now and then quitting may be OK. My soccer team would never have missed me if I didn’t turn up. My mother’s insistence I take French for the School Certificate was never a good idea.

Yet, in writing to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul asserts they can never give up but must press on. I don’t know if he would have insisted I stay on the soccer team or work harder at French but I know what he would want for me was the same as he wanted for the Philippian Christians – not a perseverance toward success, but a perseverance of the soul. He would want me to persevere in my walk with Christ. He is writing from a Roman prison – very likely his last letter before his execution. His physical movement very limited but he engages the metaphor of the chariot races to encourage his readers to press on. It is an athletic, physical and forward-looking metaphor.

I do not consider that I have made it on my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:13-14)

In Roman culture the circus, with its chariot races, provided the most popular form of entertainment. The first and greatest circus of all was the Circus Maximus in Rome. These verses just quoted from his letter to the Philippians describe the charioteer, intent on the race, his eyes fixed on the front, not daring to look behind lest the slightest pressure on the reins (wrapped around his body) produce a false move and cause him to lose the race and possibly his life.

Persistence proverbs are a staple of the self-help world. We persist so we can succeed in personal goals. Often, though not always, perseverance is seen as a positive quality because it is a means of winning out over others. But for Paul it is a way to get closer to Christ. It means not looking back, but looking ahead toward Christ with single-minded purpose.

An important part of perseverance is not looking back. Jesus says in Luke 9:62, *No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God*. The chariot metaphor is a perfect one for Paul to explain to his readers that those who long to be like Christ face danger in looking back. Paul outlines his past achievements and could proclaim himself “perfect” because he did everything he was supposed to do under the law. Yet he called all that “garbage”. In fact it is a much stronger word used only in this one place in the whole Bible. Looking back can fill us with complacency or pride. Looking back can mean we do not take into consideration our current circumstances. Looking back can also make us despondent and wanting to give up. Paul has no desire to return to his “successful” past – even though he is in prison and not likely to ever get out. For Paul, both are best forgotten in the interests of pressing on toward the objective.

Our race is not yet finished. Our work not yet done. There is still much to do for Christ and much to be achieved in the quest to be like Christ. This is the last Sunday in Lent.

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Next Sunday is Palm Sunday then Easter. We will be remembering in different ways the events of the first Easter. From the quiet Last Supper of the Tenebrae Service on Thursday night to the solemnity of Good Friday afternoon to the joy of Easter Day, we remember and celebrate what happened to Jesus and why. *For God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten son.* For God so loved YOU and ME that He gave His only begotten son.

That is why we forget what was in our past. That is why we press on toward the goal. That is why we don't look back but always look forward, keeping our eye on the finish line for only then can we hope to achieve what we strive for. That can happen no matter what our circumstances may be: whether we are in prison, in a chariot race, in a highly competitive job environment, on a sick bed, slowing down due to advancing years – whatever our age or station – we can all press on as we are called to keep on keeping on. Why? An empty cross gives you all the answers. If you search the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation seeking the answer to the question, "Why did God send Jesus?" the only answer you will find is this: *OUT OF THE GREAT LOVE WITH WHICH HE LOVED US.* That is all you will find and that is more than enough. AMEN
