

Keep striving

Sermon by Rev Ruth Moriarty

Reading: Philippians 3.12-18

There's a man called Benjamin down the market with a lazy eye, long fingers and a bright red hat. Every day he sits down on a rug and puts a small table on the floor. Out of his bag he pulls three old wooden cups and a marble. 'Eyes on the prize!' he calls out, which cup has the marble under it.

It's only the visitors now to Philippi that fall for the three cup trick now. Nobody ever wins, cause that marble has gone before the cups have moved. Oh sorry ... you didn't know?! Eyes on the prize, eyes on the prize!

Paul has sent a long letter this time to our little church. I guess he's got the time in prison. But we're grateful, so thankful because frankly since Jesus left us the way church has been going has been a bit mixed.

Some days I think we're doing great, and then other days – oh boy, church life gets you down. No – to be fair, church people get me down. One group say: 'we think things should stay the same, we don't see any reason for change' and on the other side: 'we're tired of not being listened to, please let's change'.

To be honest Paul's words have been a great comfort to me this week – keep striving. Keep going, keep running forward, keep running towards heaven, towards Jesus and the very presence of God.

You remember how Paul started out life hating Christians? In fact, he didn't just hate Christians, he actively pursued Christians, hunted them down, and persecuted them. See Christians and all churches are not welcome around here, we meet in secret, we use secret hidden pictures to make contact, we hide from the authorities.

When Paul became a Christian on the Damascus road, he was on his way to root out Christians and persecute them. God turned that Spirit, that drive, that commitment towards him instead of against him.

So when Paul says I keep striving, he means and we know he means – I'm deeply committed to God, I'm hunting for his presence, I am leaving no stones

unturned, I am in pursuit of God and I will also keep going, keep learning, keep listening but always, always, always towards heaven. To the one who holds my crown.

I'm not a runner, I don't have any fancy sandals, or a sports tunic to run in. the last time I sprinted was to get the last burger on the BBQ. But even I know, from the comfort of my armchair, that if you're going win a race, you have to be looking forwards. No one can run faster looking backwards. Even a glance to the left or the right can cost a second, can mean a runner loses a race. When you watch the Olympics – alright I've never been, but my uncle Seb went and he told me ev-ery-thing.

The runners start low, they are focussed, they're not waving to their mums, they are waiting for the signal to go, their whole body, every muscle and nerve is focussed on the line. They're trying not to think about the egg and spoon race they lost when they were 6, they are saying in their heads – 'I'm gonna win, I'm gonna run like never before', and they are looking so hard at that line. Eyes on the prize.

Have you been striving this week? I've been striving to understand other people's experiences. I've been striving to hear voices that I don't want to listen to. I've been striving to learn more and more about the heartbeat of God and the call of the Spirit in these days.

I take heart that as much as I strive and pursue God, he has already gone before me. He's rolled out the path and left the gate on the latch.

Jesus strove to teach us, never gave up on us, always had a kind word to those in need, never turned a sick person away, always welcomed children. But he spoke of a new day, a new kingdom where God could be found.

He told little stories about what the kingdom was like, it was a tiny mustard seed that grows, or like when a man found a pearl, he sold everything he had so he could buy it. The kingdom is always about being active, like a woman kneading dough, the kingdom is about seeking God in our regular lives and seeing what God might do.

If we're called to be kingdom people, people of the king – then we must be like that too huh? Always looking, searching, kneading, growing, and straining to win the prize.

Just before Jesus was arrested, he prayed in a garden with his friends. He was feeling the strain of his life.

Of all our lives. He asked that it might be taken away from him, and yet never gave up on us. Never gave up on offering his life for all of us, so that each of us can follow him to heaven. That's grace, real grace.

The kind of grace God has is one that is based entirely in love, love that conquers all. Love that cares for the oppressed, love that challenges the oppressors and calls all of us to keep striving.

Eyes on the prize, eyes on the prize! You know no-one knows what the prize is at Benjamin's stall, no-one's ever won it. Paul's not so clear what the prize is exactly in this letter, but if you read the others as well, you'll know the prize is a place in heaven, a crown on your head – for we're Gods children, so we get crowns too. But the point more is not the prize, but the running, striving and pursuing.

In these days, when I find myself wanting to shout at idiots spouting in the market, when I have to hold my tongue when my aunts make racist jokes, when I'm afraid of offending people on both sides, his words – keep striving speak to me.

They remind me that I strive, because Jesus strives for me. They assure me that as I pursue Jesus in humility, so he runs with me. They help me not to give up, for all of us must strive for a world that lifts up the lowly, breaks the yoke of slavery, and sets the prisoners free. Jesus has done the hard work, he died for each of us, for every misplaced word, for every dodgy picture shared, we must move on from where we are, and strive to run as Jesus did, heavenward bound.

May you know too the cloud of witnesses cheering us to keep running, striving and not to give up for the Lord does not give up on us. Keep striving to heaven, to the one who calls us to him.