

In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* Stepan visits Levin while in the process of selling a forest to someone else. Levin thinking that he has undervalued the sale price asks Stepan if he has 'counted the trees?' Stepan being a townie laughs at such an idea and replies; 'Count the sands of the sea, number the stars. Some higher power might do it.' For Stepan the idea of counting trees was so alien that he didn't know where to even begin and saw it as something only God could do. Nothing Levin said could convince him that if he counted the trees he would see that he had undervalued the land and it was worth far more.

How we perceive things has a massive impact on how we treat and value things. What do we value? What, as Paul asked the Philippians, are our minds set on? Things of the earth or things of heaven? The spiritual or the physical?

The Apostle Paul said to his fellow Christians in Philippi, "Join with others in following my example". Can you even imagine being able to say that to people without sounding conceited? Paul was not being conceited, however. He was not being proud, when he said, "Follow my example." He could say it sincerely, because what he was really saying was, follow my example in trying to follow in Christ's footsteps. He wasn't saying I have got everything right, he was saying I have found the answer to the questions you seek. The congregation in Philippi was new to Christianity and they were growing in faith and knowledge of Christ. They had been free from the doctrinal errors that had surfaced in the congregations around them but now a group of people called Judaizers were trying worm their way into the congregation and undermine the Gospel message that Paul had brought to Philippi. Judaizers were Jew or Gentile converts to Christianity who claimed to believe in Jesus as their Saviour, but they also taught that in addition to believing in Jesus it was necessary to keep certain ceremonial laws that God had given to Israel. They hadn't appreciated the true value of what belief in Jesus as their Saviour actually meant. The very thought of people who claimed to be followers of Jesus but who lived contrary to the gospel brought tears to Paul's eyes.

Throughout the Scriptures, we are told repeatedly not to be caught up in the things of this world. The world teaches that we are to be selfish and self-centred, as Mike pointed out last night the power that can come with fame or riches can easily destroy us. Be careful though it is not because power itself destroys, we just need to look to Jesus to see how power can and was used for good, to bring about justice and peace, to release the captives and give sight to the blind. It is the misuse of power that destroys and brings about sorrow and heartache. But here in Philippi it isn't those obsessed with the twenty first century obsessions of money, possessions, and pleasure. They had the prize, they had heard the Good News and believed, but hadn't realised just how valuable it was, they hadn't counted the trees, they were still living under the impression that laws, not love brought about God's will.

Paul is not alone in shedding tears over God's people, we heard in our Gospel reading how Jesus too grieved for God's chosen. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"

We can sense in these words the broken heart of Jesus. The loving Shepherd would leave the 99 to pursue that one lost sheep. Why? Because that one sheep is as loved and valued by the Shepherd as the 99. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they didn't search out God, God searched for them. Jacob didn't go into the desert looking for a wrestling match with God, but God pursued Jacob, wrestled all night with Him and changed his name to Israel. And when Israel's descendents would wander away, God would pursue them. Prophet after prophet was sent. And each had the same message, "turn your hearts back to God because He loves you and wants you to be with Him." But with each prophet came the rejection. And the rejection wasn't just of the messenger, but of the One who sent the messenger. And the more God spoke, the more mankind turned a deaf ear. The more God showed His love, the more that love was rejected. And this love prompted God to do the unthinkable. When they wouldn't listen to the prophets, perhaps they would listen to God Himself.

It was this love which wrapped itself in human flesh and descended to be born of Mary. It was this love which walked the hard trails of Galilee and spoke to the hard hearts of the religious. It was this love which left Heaven to come into our world, and it was this love that was ultimately rejected. (John 1:10-11) "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

Focusing on Jesus and heavenly things should be a major part of our Christian living. We should not be earth bound and world orientated. This is not the way Christians live in this world because the world is not our permanent home. As Paul reminds us, "our citizenship is in heaven" "Citizens of heaven" is more than a pious phrase, it is term of the great honour which God is pleased to bestow on us for Jesus' sake. Citizenship in Israel was highly prized in Old Testament times, citizens of the land that God had given to Abram, being counted as one of the chosen people of his inheritance as numerous as the stars. Roman citizenship was highly prized in New Testament times, it gave security and comfort, it meant you could travel freely and had recourse to justice and privilege. However all kingdoms of this world will all come to an end and as they do people switch allegiance as their rulers and governments change. But the citizen of heaven belongs to a kingdom that will never end and never change. The citizen of heaven will not have his citizenship taken from them as the Apostle Peter tells us it is "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven" (1 Peter 1:4). As the writer of the Epistle to the Romans puts it people may steal our earthly life, but, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

In Lent we all too often major on what we have given up, but what about those things we value and have kept, have we counted our trees of late. The gifts and blessings that God has bestowed on us. Do we sell ourselves and our faith short? Would Paul look at us and weep? More to the point would Jesus stand at the door and sigh longing for us to be under the safety of his protection, we don't think of ourselves as unwilling, oh no, independent, strong, self-reliant, we can manage. We wouldn't have been the ones stoning God's messengers, would we?

Here we are loved and precious beyond imagining in God's eyes, so precious God knows the very numbers of the hairs on our head, so precious that Jesus is sent to die for us. Do we value that, really value that, not just put some kind of arbitrary idea on what coming to church means for us. But value that in being God's people, in following in Christ's footsteps, in knowing that we are citizens of heaven? Do we value it enough to rest in the safety and security of God's protection, putting all our trust in God? We begin Lent by cleansing, by giving up those things that would distort our focus on God, as we continue let us hone our eyes and focus on the trees, so that we may know the true value of being one of Christ's own and know that we are indeed precious beyond all deserving and understanding. If we can grasp that this Lent, then maybe this Holy Week and Passion we will also grasp a deeper understanding of just how much God loves us. Louder Alleluia!