

7:1 HAVE STARTED, WILL FINISH

The one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 Corinthians 5:5

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1:6

'I've started, so I'll finish' is the signature phrase of Magnus Magnusson in *Mastermind*, the TV brains contest. He said it whenever the time ran out on his question to a contestant. It is also God's promise to every struggling believer: he has started the 'good work' of making us like Christ, and he will make sure it is completed by the time Jesus returns to gather his people to himself.

This finishing power isn't the product of my willpower or spiritual gungho, it is the unique specialism of the Holy Spirit. So when Paul assures the little church at Philippi that they won't die out like a guttering candle, he is staking everything on the Spirit, even though he doesn't refer to him by name.

When I buy a gadget for home use, it comes with a 'guarantee' which promises free maintenance and repairs for a certain time, after which I'll have to arrange things at my own expense. Not so with the Lord's work: it's guaranteed for as long as it takes.

So do I just sit back and enjoy the attentions of the Spirit like Wooster enjoying the ministrations of Jeeves? No way! Paul says, 'Not that I have already obtained all this, or have arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me' (Philippians 3:12). The enemy of prayer is complacency, thinking I've arrived, and forgetting my part in 'taking hold' of the work of the Spirit in strengthening my relationship with Christ.

If I've got someone who 'is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy' (Jude 24), am I energetically laying hold of his promise to finish what he's started?

7:2 MISSION

Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'

John 20:21-22

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

Mark 16:15

We are two thousand years down the line from when these words were spoken by our Lord, but they have the same relevance as they had then. They are addressed, not to a special few, but to the whole Church. They are not so much a three-line whip as an invitation to find out what God is doing and join in.

Jesus compared the Church to 'salt' (which preserves meat from corruption and makes food taste more interesting) and 'light' (like a hill-top town winking invitingly to lost or weary travellers). It is not that any given church or group of believers has these qualities in itself; it describes how the Holy Spirit is going to guide, equip and enable them to carry out God's unique work of bringing in the new heavens and the new earth.

Is this a 'Mission Impossible'? Paul asks, 'Who is equal to such a task?' and concludes 'Not that we are competent in ourselves, but our competence comes from God' (2 Corinthians 2:16, 3:5). If God is going to do the sending, he must provide the sufficiency. This too is Holy Spirit territory, for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), and his work is ongoing.

We may need to revise our ideas about why the universal Church, why my local church has come into being. In sea-going terms, it is not so much a luxury cruise ship as a lifeboat. There are people struggling in the waves out there. Everyone on board has their allocated task. But do we see the urgency?

Show me, Lord, how I can play a part in your ongoing work of seeking and saving the lost, remembering how I too have been pulled on board out of the waters.

7:3 TRANSFORMATION

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

Romans 8:11

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Philippians 3:20-21

Stanley Spencer's famous painting 'Cookham Resurrection' shows villagers climbing out of their graves on the Last Day, unchanged from their former lives. But the 'transforming of our earthly bodies' that Paul describes is a much more radical makeover: 'the body that is sown is perishable, inglorious, frail, physical; it is raised imperishable, glorious, mighty, spiritual' (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

Nature provides a classic analogy in caterpillars that turn into butterflies. Your caterpillar is alive, sure, but it has no conception of the magnificent creature to come. It is earthbound, sluggish and comparatively dull in appearance. Then it enters its cocoon and dies to its former existence; it undergoes a total metamorphosis and emerges as a multicoloured, versatile citizen of the air, with a range of abilities far beyond its previous self. It is a citizen of the skies.

God's Spirit we already have living in us, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, generates this transformation. No amount of human mental or moral energy can do it. Yes, by faith in Christ we are already inheritors of new life, but 'you ain't seen nothing yet.' Christ's return, guaranteed by his word, will summon us out of our cocoons, and the Spirit's resurrecting work will be complete.

'Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure' (1 John 3:2-3). There is still a great deal to be done! But the end result is going to be worth everything.

7:4 ANTICIPATION

Through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

Galatians 5:5

In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

2 Peter 3:13

One of the disciplines I imposed upon myself as a teacher was not to look forward to the end of term, so that it came as a delightful surprise. Of course I had to endure the old jibe, 'You teachers are only in it for the holidays.' My reply was, 'Stand in front of a class for a week then say that again.'

Peter's quotation about the new heaven and new earth comes from the last pages of Isaiah, in which the prophet anticipates the joy and rejoicing there is going to be in the new Jerusalem, God's holy mountain. It won't be like the former times when there was weeping and crying; those times will be forgotten. There will be total 'rightness' – everything is going to be all right.

Of course, everything is not all right yet. We are still waiting, and sometimes this requires a lot of faith and hope. But we have two allies: the promises of God scattered throughout the Bible, and the assurances given us by the Holy Spirit in our hearts. If we feed ourselves eagerly and often from these sources, we will be less prone to depression or despair.

C S Lewis captures this anticipation beautifully in the final pages of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Aslan says to the children, 'You do not yet look as happy as I mean you to be. Have you not guessed?' The children's hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. 'The term is over; the holidays have begun,' says the Lion. 'The dream is ended; this is the morning.'

Lord, sometimes life on earth seems to be all there is, a little good and a lot of evil. But you said, 'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness' (Matthew 6:33). Stir up my spirit with your Spirit, and my faith with your words. Help me to be a looker forward, and take away my fear.