

June 26, 2016

From today's epistle reading: "For freedom Christ has set us free."

When the apostle Paul wrote to the churches he had founded or visited, he never dreamed that his letters would one day be collected into anything like "sacred scripture", a second part of the body of writing and teaching that had shaped and nourished him. For Paul, the scriptures consisted of the books of the Law, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms, Proverbs, and other wisdom writings. The gospels had not yet been written down, but collections of stories about Jesus and teachings or sayings of Jesus were circulating orally. And there were others besides Paul setting down their thoughts in letter form.

Paul's letters were private correspondence between him and various Christian communities, and were often written in response to particular problems or questions within a community. What we have, in many of Paul's letters, is his half of an ongoing conversation. We are overhearing a dialogue, and we have to infer the other half from what Paul says. So here's the situation. The letter to the Galatians is written to a community of Gentile Christians living in a region of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) that had been inhabited by so-called barbarians and later incorporated into the Roman Empire. Paul had visited the area on his first missionary journey, proclaimed his message, and established a church. After he moved on, the community was visited by Christians from Jerusalem, who kept the Jewish law in addition to their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. These people started telling the Galatians that they also needed to adhere to the Law of Moses, including the dietary laws and the law of circumcision. They accused Paul of watering down the faith to make it more acceptable to Gentiles.

We're coming into the middle of the conversation today, and Paul is simply furious. Earlier in his letter, he says, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." "Not that there is a different gospel," he hastens to add, "but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." In fact, says Paul, if anyone proclaims a message contrary to what he proclaimed, that person should be accursed! Let them go to hell! Paul even calls the Galatians names. "You stupid Galatians!" he says. "Who has tricked you into believing something different than what I said?"

When Paul speaks of "my gospel", he doesn't mean only the message about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What Paul is also talking about is the impact of Jesus on him. And the word that comes up over and over again is "freedom". "For freedom Christ has set us free."

What exactly is the nature of Christian freedom? For Paul, it means first of all freedom from obeying the Law of Moses. There is a great struggle going on in the Galatian churches between those who accept Paul's proclamation of the gospel and those who insist that Christians, whether of Jewish or gentile background, must also accept the Law, summed up in the sign of circumcision. Paul is quite distressed over those who are accepting circumcision. He sees it as falling back into slavery. He knows that he himself was unable to keep the whole law, and that his salvation comes from relying solely on God's grace made available through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul warns them that to accept one part of the Law means they are obligated to obey the whole law, and then they are no longer relying on Christ's grace for

forgiveness and justification. He ends with the heartfelt, if somewhat vindictive, wish that those who are advocating circumcision would go the whole way and castrate themselves!

Secondly, Christian freedom means freedom to love. For Paul, the good news of God in Christ is that he, and by extension all humankind, is set free from bondage to sin and death, free from divisions, and free to love and serve in a new way. The Law is summed up, not in the sign of circumcision, but in the commandment to love.

And there seems to be another problem in the Galatian churches. Some people are apparently saying that freedom from the Law means freedom to do whatever they like. So Paul has to warn them – do not use your freedom as an excuse for self-indulgence. He goes on to contrast the works of the flesh and the works of the Spirit (emphasize capital “S”). The works of the flesh include things we might expect to hear: fornication, impurity, drunkenness, and carousing. But the word “flesh” in Paul’s vocabulary does not mean the physical body – skin and bones and muscles. “Flesh” means unredeemed human nature, human nature opposed to God, and so it includes the mind and the will as well. We interpret the “sins of the flesh” in physical, usually sexual terms, and we tend to regard sexual sins as the worst of all. But look what Paul includes in his list of “works of the flesh”: strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, and envy. These are anything but material sins, and yet they have a direct impact on the life and health of the Body of Christ. Sometimes we worry about the church today being divided over various issues. Clearly, this has been happening pretty well since Day 1. The Galatian churches have a major problem of conflict within the community. Christianity is not about dualism – the elevation of the “spiritual” and the denigration of the material. Paul’s words are a warning to Christians of every generation – the sins of envy, factionalism, and dissension are every bit as serious as sexual sins or any other kind of sin, and those who do such things have no part in God’s realm!

Christianity is not anti-materialistic. Quite the contrary; the biblical tradition says that the whole purpose of the material order is to become the outward and visible sign – the sacrament – of God’s glory. The coming of Jesus the Christ is the coming of God in the flesh, the moment at which the creation’s destiny is fully and finally revealed. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that “the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” No disembodied souls floating up to heaven here! Trees, rocks, stars, and mud have their place in the Christian hope. Earth itself, in one of the bible’s final images of salvation, becomes the locus of the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven, where God makes God’s dwelling with mortals and wipes away every tear. And so we use water and oil, bread and wine in the central acts of our life in faith. If they are holy, it is not because the rest of the material order is unholy. The water and oil, bread and wine are holy as a sign and reminder of the holiness of all created things. We care about and work for the preservation of “this fragile earth, our island home”. We care about and feed hungry bodies. We care about and try to relieve the suffering of ill and injured bodies. We do these things because the water and oil, bread and wine not only take us back to Christ but take us forward to the fulfillment of creation that he has begun.

Paul says that if we claim to live by the Spirit, we must be guided by the Spirit. I notice when I read this passage carefully that he draws the contrast between the *works* of the flesh and the *fruits* of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is to guide and teach the followers of Jesus. You know

the saying, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” Or the other saying, “By their fruits you shall know them.” So the presence and activity – the work – of the Spirit results in certain signs. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – these are evidence of a life guided by the Spirit. This is summer, the season of growing things. Of all the fruits of the Spirit, which one do you think God is calling you to cultivate in your life this year? In my case, I usually ask for patience, because it is my impatience that often lands me in trouble.

And finally, Christian freedom is freedom to serve. If the law is summed up in the commandment to love, Paul cites specifically the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself. He says, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another,” – something the organizers of so-called “Freedom Convoys” would do well to remember. Service to others is the opposite of, and the antidote to, a life of self-indulgence. It is a paradox of the Christian life that we find our greatest freedom, not in license, but in serving God by serving others. Thomas Cramner expressed this truth in one of his collects for Morning Prayer – “O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom...” In Christ we find a radical freedom in which we are no longer constrained by questions like, “How much do I have to do?” or “What does the Law require?” Instead we are set free to live as we were created – in a community of mutual support and accountability.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

- free to depend on God’s grace in Jesus Christ
- free to love
- free to serve

May we treasure this gift and live in the freedom of the one who came not to be served, but to serve. Amen.