

Faith or Law?

Psalm 40:1-11, Galatians 3:23-29,

19 June 2022

If you operate a computer or a smart 'phone I wonder how many e-mails or text messages do you receive a day? If my inbox is anything to go by, it would be quite a lot. This way of communication is such an important feature of our lives these days, isn't it? Its ease and speed make it essential. Its usefulness cannot be over-estimated, especially in days when other ways of communication is not possible, as it happened during the early days of the COVID pandemic. How pleased we were then to have at least the written word! But the written word has its draw-backs too. It can easily be misunderstood, it can be sent to the wrong person by accident, a fault in punctuation mark can alter the meaning, it can never truly convey emotions, or only in a restricted, raw, almost stark way. Without the accompanying body language, facial expression, a twinkle of the eye, or a gentle touch on the arm, which can modify the meaning of words, it can only deliver less than half of the intended message.

Of course, at the time of the Apostle Paul there was only one way to get the messages to far-away people and that was writing letters. The result: as much as 45% of the New Testament is taken up by the epistles of Paul and his followers. Paul, himself was fully aware that a letter is not the same as personal communication. The verses read to us by Heather from Galatians, for example, do not indicate any high emotions. But a few verses after today's Lectionary portion Paul's frustration is quite clear, when he cries out: "How I wish I could be with you now, for then I could modify my tone, as it is, I am at my wits end about you."

So, why was Paul at his wits end about the churches at Galatia? And why would his tone be in need of modification? Well, to answer the second question first, we don't have to go very far. Chapter 3, where today's reading comes from, starts with the exclamation: 'You stupid Galatians! You must have been bewitched – you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly displayed on the cross!' As this was a circular letter, which would have been read out to live audiences within their acts of worship, we can imagine the kind of impact it must have had. Just think, how you would feel, if you heard words like that from the pulpit today! And these are not the strongest words Paul uses in this letter!

Galatians is a curious letter. In it Paul expresses more truly and more concisely the Good News of Jesus Christ, than anywhere else. He points his churches to the reality of a new, transformed life, with all its amazing consequences, which becomes possible for the followers of Christ. And in some parts he does call the Galatians his very own children and his friends Yet, the

intemperate language used in the rest of the letter may make us flinch. It is quite difficult to reconcile this Paul with the Paul who wrote the beautiful words about love in 1 Cor 13 or the words of the very personal, affectionate letter he wrote to the Philippians.

We do have difficulty with this dichotomy. We do not like to see our heroes tarnished. We want our heads of state, or Governments, our parents, our teachers, our ministers, and anybody we look up to – to be perfect. But, of course, none of them are, for we are all far more complex creatures than simply 'perfect' or 'flawed'. Amongst my mother's memorable sayings was one she often ended up with when she was in danger of losing in a good-natured theological debate around the family table. She would close the argument with: "Well, I am not Saint Paul!" Clearly, in her mind Saint Paul was the ultimate authority.

Well, this 'ultimate authority' must have been truly upset when he penned, or dictated this letter. Some Jewish Christians in the Galatian churches demanded that any new convert should be subject to the Law of Moses, in effect first become Jewish before accepted into the Christian church. Their demand focussed on keeping the dietary laws and submit to circumcision. Both of these sound pretty remote to us, but what lies behind them, is very much a live issue even in our own discipleship now in the 21st century. It touches on questions like, how to use and interpret Scripture, what does faith mean to us, what is the relationship between Church and society, and so on.

Looking at the use of Scripture, we have to start with reminding ourselves that Scripture here means Jewish Scriptures, what we Christians call the OT. For, as we know, Paul's Letters, - pre-date even the earliest of the Gospels. From these letters we get rare glimpses of the early church in its very formation and of the struggles they faced as they tried to follow Christ. AS we may do, they turned to their Scriptures to find meaning in their religious experiences. And as we said earlier the written word is liable to misunderstanding and is open to interpretation, so sometimes they came to different conclusions from the same texts. Doesn't this sound familiar, when we look at today's religious scene? Most of the divisions between the Christian churches can be traced back to differences in biblical interpretation. Bill Loader, the Australian theologian likens Paul's Christian opponents to today's so-called 'fundamentalist' Christians, whose interpretation of Scriptures was a literal one and who couldn't get along with Paul's more 'liberal' use of the Word of God, as they understood it.

Paul's life-changing experience with the risen Christ may not have changed his temperament, but it totally transformed his understanding of the God of Israel and made him convinced that the ancient promises had come to fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth. Hence his fervent defence of the faith through which his allegiance has been transferred from the Law to Christ.

“Before this faith came – he says – we were...in the custody of law....The law was thus put in charge of us until Christ should come... and now that faith has come, its charge is at an end.”

In the heat of the debate it is not surprising that this was understood by some as doing away with the whole Jewish Scripture. Well, Paul is definitely not doing that, as his developing argument proves later. But he is certainly challenging the self-understanding of those Jewish Christians, who believed themselves to be the privileged, unique people of God, and whose religious customs may have served to exclude rather than include others. For a newly formed community - trying to define their identity and indeed for any community hoping to grow, - this is a crucial question. How to be distinct and different, yet remain open and not make unreasonable difficulties for those wanting to join them? Paul now has a new understanding and a far greater vision of God in Christ, but he has to argue back from the same Scriptures. This is what he does in this letter and it is fascinating to follow his creative interpretation as he argues for faith from Abraham to Christ.

It would be an easy mistake to make that, by contrasting faith with law Paul advocates an ‘easier’ religion, where you don’t need to do the ‘hard’ work of obeying every detail of the law. But nothing is further from the truth. Using Abraham as an example Paul argues that it was Abraham’s faith that made him acceptable to God, not his obedience to the law, since the Law was not even in existence in Abraham’s time. What is interesting here is that Paul relies on the Hebrew concept of ‘emunah’, the word normally translated as faith. But this translation does not do justice to the depth of the original meaning, which is closer to the ideas of ‘trust’ and ‘reliance’ and ‘faithfulness’. It expresses a more practical, active kind of *relationship with God* than faith, as an intellectual assent to certain *statements about God*. It expresses that loyalty, which keeps Christians in the orbit of God even in the darkest moments of life and helps them stay on the radical way Jesus trod before them. It was not for nothing that the early Christians were known as people of the Way (that is the way they lived) rather than for what they believed.

And this is the relationship, which in Paul’s mind, leads to the revolutionary ideas of those un-heard of lines:

“There is no such thing as Jew and Greek (meaning Gentile), slave and freeman, male and female, for you are all one person in Jesus Christ.”

Can we say on that basis, Paul was the first human rights champion, who advocated universal equality in all parts of society? Hardly. Paul was not a revolutionary in the sense that he would have wanted to overthrow the prevailing political and social system. His concern was to create communities, where people

come together before God, as God’s equal children. Not children, like under aged members of a family, but children, who are heirs of all the riches of God through the simple fact that they all belong to Christ. And, in fact, all this was to do with ‘belonging to Christ’. Paul doesn’t say that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and freeman, male and female; Or in today’s categories between rich and poor, between different ideological convictions, between people with different skin colours. What he says is that these distinctions are ultimately irrelevant and subordinate to the fact that we do belong to Christ.

So where do we draw the line on this question of equality? Let me finish by introducing a short imaginary dialogue between the Apostle Paul and ourselves, I found it in Dominic Crossan’s book he co-wrote with Jonathan Reed entitled *In Search of Paul*:

Question: Do you think, Paul, that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights?

Paul: *I am not speaking about all men, but about all Christians.*

Question: But, do you think, Paul that, all people should be Christians?

Paul: *Yes, of course.*

Question: And, do you think Paul that, all Christians should be equal with one another?

Paul: *Yes, of course.*

Question: Then, do you think Paul that, it is God’s will for all people to be equal with one another?

Paul: *Well, let me think about that one for awhile, and in the meantime you think about equality in Christ*

Let us do so.

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