

Listening in on Galatians: The Law never sets us free

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 3:23 – 4:7 ESV)

After each Pentecost we hear each Sunday, portions of the Bible chosen to make us grow in our faith. We're in the green – growth of the Church or Christians – season. Each year picks up a Gospel – this year is Luke – and after Pentecost a number of New Testament letters. So for the last three weeks and for the next two we're hearing Galatians; after that Colossians, then bits of Hebrews, 1 and 2 Timothy and 2 Thessalonians. Next year it will be different. Let's return to Galatians.

I call it the angry letter. Paul has heard that some or all of the churches in Galatia – scholars are still not sure exactly where but think central Turkey(ish) – have heard a Gospel 'supplement' – are being taken down a blind and condemning path – a false Gospel – which we find throughout the letter are 'the works of the law' and it seems particularly circumcision. The logic of the false preachers seems to be 'Paul has told you Gentiles about Jesus as the Messiah, as Saviour, but he missed a point; Jesus came for the Jews and to be saved which is possible you must become Jews to fulfil the law' to which Paul responds bluntly in Chapter 1: *damnamus* – we condemn – let them be accursed.

The Gospel by circumcision is not a theological opinion but an anti-Gospel; spiritual poison. The works of the law must give way to hearing the faith. The emphasis on the flesh must give way to the Spirit. For Paul, this wasn't theoretical but reality. One way is death and one way is life. And he spends 6 chapters hammering away – passionate, concerned, furious, exasperated, caring – all those emotions a parent has who's afraid of losing or who has lost a child who's been disobedient and run off when finding them wanting to hug them and kill them at the same time! If he's dictating the letter, I imagine Paul speaking fast and getting so impatient that he grabs pen and parchment himself to write the last bit or at least making sure his own handwriting shows his seriousness. If he's written the whole thing, then it is one large lettered scrawled scroll that has no finesse, just speed and emotion.

Our second reading today picks up Paul's attack on the law. We're partway through his arguments. Justification is by faith – that was true of Abraham. The law of God (used in the singular to comprise all codes, rules, and regulations, summarised in the 10 Commandments) sets up ways of behaving but not ways of saving or being saved for their outcome is a realisation that we are cursed. That's not just a spiritual declaration but an empirical reality – we need laws but they bred more laws, they create jungles and attempt – valiant at times – to bring about justice, but in truth suffocate and drown us under more and more rules, causing us to fear each step, to be aware that we're damned if we do and damned if we don't – and yet in this world the rule of law is better than chaos, anarchy or who has the biggest fist.

Paul sees the law as theological and chronological. The chronology can be seen in God's treatment of his people particularly with Moses where it was given so the people of God could live in such a way

that God would tabernacle with his people. The problem became that the people thought that their obedience brought about God's presence and favour and didn't notice that the law revealed their sin which led them to the sacrifices which God had commanded. The law in fact can't work obedience in us – we're always scheming ways out of or around it.

And this is where we pick Paul up today. The world is restrained in sin and we are restrained by the law. The law is like a custodian or tutor – a pedagogue – slaves whose tasks were to ensure that the Greek boy went to school, got home, did his lessons, and they had quite a range of ways of getting it done, most of them unpleasant, and so the boy was restrained by the pedagogue. But the time comes when the child grows up or in this case, Paul says you – you Galatians – you Galatians who are not foolish enough to go under the law pedagogue 'you are all sons and daughters of God through faith'; you are 'in Christ' no matter who you are through Baptism. You have put on Christ – you are clothed in Christ – through faith and are linked to the promise given to Abraham. Forget the law's distinctions about you, your gender, nationality or economic status, your identity is new – in Christ individually, one in Christ corporately.

This section is hotly debated as to whether this applies in the world as a social revolution but I'm not convinced and one reason is that Paul doesn't stay here and expand the point in practical terms but immediately returns to schoolboy picture which he then tweaks. Paul's focus is solely on making sure that the law of God is understood as not the means of salvation – all religions created by humans are essentially rules – to which people are enslaved – pray to the sun, ask the stars, worship that rock, meditate via that plant – but now humanity need not be so enslaved because the time has fully come and God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law – and here it comes – so that we might become his God's children – so that we might not try to placate God, try to appease him, but instead stop worrying and call out 'Abba' – an intimate word for 'Father'.

The Law enslaves; the Gospel frees. Paul will go onto say that we are not to use our freedom to sin but that's in coming weeks. Today it's like we've come in partway through an argument, a lecture, a discourse about the law and the promise, about our hopes for this world and the one to come – do they rest ultimately in our own hands or in the hands of someone else? We've come here and interrupted our lives, paused them, so to speak, to consider them from another perspective. Our week has had joys and sorrows, fears and certainties, we may be in the middle of crisis or just cruising sweetly, bank balances high or low but here we listen again or we're reminded of another way of looking at things – not legally or socially or politically or economically or psychologically but spiritually – and the lenses are not of our making! For Lutherans they're called Law and Gospel, demand and promise, messages fulfilled in Jesus so that we may be free – battle sin, repent and be free – and live each day in this world confident that come what may God will not break his promise to us because the hands of the one who holds us have been pierced for us.