

This morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians is a remarkable summary of the content of Christian belief. And yet, although everything is rightly expressed, there is nothing here which will enable us to re-experience what Paul talks about, or to experience it for the first time. It is good doctrine but suffers the fate of all doctrinal statements in that it lies flat on the page, true, but lacking in itself the power to change us. The reading has been carefully cut by the lectionary to turn it into something which makes it look a what we might call a "Christmas" text. And so we hear Christmassy things: "...when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman", and so forth. But Paul has no interest in Christmas – at least not the sort of interest we have. What he *is* interested in is Jesus' relationship to us. And this ought to matter to us as well because unless there is something intrinsic connecting us to Jesus of Nazareth – the baby and the man – then there is no point in the church honouring him in the way that it does, commending him to the wider world, or celebrating Christmas.

So how *is* the Christ Child related to us? With Christmas, perhaps the dominant and most influential image is that of the baby. We like babies. We once were babies! Christmas suggests to us that, as we once were helpless, and innocent, so also was Jesus, and so this we have in common with him. As he was a tiny bundle of possibilities, and the focus of great hope for his parents, so were we. When Paul says of Jesus "born of a woman", we can hear him saying that Jesus was as we are: he was one of us.

Yet, this doesn't tell us much about why Jesus might matter. It is no marvellous thing simply to say that Jesus was a human being. But Paul goes further in his statement of what Jesus shares with us. Not only is Jesus said to be "born of a woman"; he is also "born under the law". Here he moves beyond basic biology and begins to stir us up a bit about our understandings of ourselves and Jesus. "Born under the law" adds a theological dimension to human being which is less certain for us. It's not that Jesus' being born under the law makes him less human; it is rather that we mightn't be so sure that being under the law is a *necessary* part of the description a human being.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly our lives are subject to laws – at the very least the law of nature, and we are aware of many other limitations besides. Yet we are also very conscious today of our

And so I suspect that Paul's suggestion that we are "slaves" – and that we move from being slaves to being children of God on account of Jesus redeeming us from being under the law – also doesn't really fit our perception of ourselves. For believers and non-believers alike there is a resonance with the baby Jesus which reflects what we recognise from our own babies. But for both believers and non-believers I suspect there is also some uncertainty – or even a rejection – of the suggestion that our common humanity with Jesus extends to our being enslaved by the effects of the law, and of sin. To be "under the law" in Paul's sense is not yet to be free, not yet to have received the inheritance still held in trust for us, and for many in and out of the church this is scarcely believable.

But by reading a little more broadly around the little section we have heard from Galatians today, we can bring Paul to bear on our own thinking about the significance of Jesus' sharing of our humanity, and that it matters that it is *Jesus* who shares it. The verses which follow on from what we've already heard are these:

*Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?*

Again we strike the uncomfortable assertion that apart from Christ we are enslaved by "weak and beggarly" spirits, but I want to focus more on Paul's little shift on the idea of knowing God. Paul writes: "now...that you have come to know God, or rather *to be known by God*...". This is a quick twist which almost passes without notice – "to know God, or rather to be known by God". Yet such an apparently passing clarification is actually a very important point for Paul. For *us* the question is usually one about who knows God, or does not know God – and so we become very concerned about such things as the "true meaning of Christmas" and who does or doesn't know it. But for Paul the critical point is *God knowing us*, or not knowing us... The difference is enormous.

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freedom, and would consider *freedom* to be a more basic element of the human being than being bound by law.

The God who sends and who raises Jesus from the dead is the God who knows us – in fact, the God who knows us better than we know ourselves. Whereas we might wonder about how Jesus' humanity might be related to ours, Paul sees the whole thing around the other way: how our humanity relates to that of Jesus. And this humanity is not a matter of being "born of a woman", or sharing a common biology. It is theologically described in terms of relationship to God through bondage in sin under the law. This theological dimension of our humanity is critical and as important at Christmas time as at Easter.

Earlier in his letter to the Galatians Paul expresses his surprise that, even though Jesus had been clearly portrayed to them as *crucified*, they were turning away from their original experience.<sup>2</sup> "You foolish Galatians!" he cries. "Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!" I suspect that most of us would expect Paul to evangelise by giving a public portrayal of Jesus as *resurrected*. *Anyone* can be crucified, but resurrection is kind of special! Yet, Paul refers *not* to the resurrection, but to the *crucifixion*, because it is the crucifixion which tells us what the resurrection means.<sup>3</sup> The Galatians had seen that Jesus – though finally revealed in the resurrection as God's chosen one – died the death not of a righteous man but the death of a sinner. *For your sake* – that is, for Galatians as Gentile sinners – he was counted as a sinner, that God might demonstrate in his resurrection that even

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<sup>2</sup> That is, turning towards becoming Jews through circumcision.

<sup>3</sup> These days a lot of work is often done by some Christians to prove that Jesus was raised from the dead. It's a very interesting exercise in historical detective work, but it usually misses the point. There is no point in proving that Jesus was raised from the dead unless somehow *I* am caught up in his *death*. Our response to a "proof" of Jesus' resurrection could well be, so what? Lucky *Jesus!* And our response *will* be that, unless I can see that in some sense *I* am identified with the *dead* Jesus – that he and I have something in common. I might also add in passing that theories of Christ's work which have to do with the Old Testament's sacrificial system also don't get to the point that Paul is making. The Gentiles are not Jews, they don't know about sacrificial lambs and all that. They have heard something else from Paul; if they don't need circumcision to receive God's promises, they don't need to assent to theories about how God saves through sacrifice.

those considered sinners are not beyond the reach of God. "For your sake" – that is, *God knows you*. God has "comprehended" you (in the old sense of the that word; cf. John 1.5 KJV). God has embraced you. And all of this *before* you knew God.

The good news of the gospel is that God knows us better than we know ourselves – as "under the law", and imperfectly so – and *yet* loves us. In Paul, God knows the Gentile sinners before they know they are "Gentile sinners". God knows those of us today "born under the law", enslaved to elemental powers – those things I suggested on Christmas day believers and non-believers alike are beholden to – even before we know ourselves as such.

God was in Christ at Easter and at Christmas, overcoming – triumphing over – our deathly alienation from God – an alienation which Jews and Gentiles share. For Paul, what all humankind has in common is not merely our biology, but lives lived imperfectly under the law, and so lives enslaved, under the curse of death through sin. For Paul, then, Jesus has in common with all humankind that he too came to stand under the curse of sin – "born under the law". For Paul, the miracle is not that God can raise a person from the dead, but can raise a person *who stands under the curse of sin*. For Paul, if God does this for Jesus, then God does it for all.

This is the good news of the gospel. It's *not* that God loves everyone, because we're all more or less OK – that we were once babies like Jesus – and love is what a God does. The good news is rather that God loves everyone – *you* – *as you already are* – in your very worst moments, and even in what we think are our very best moments but in which we are sometimes the most tragically deluded about ourselves.

Being Christian is a matter of learning to know ourselves as God knows us – *less* than we ought to be but loved *nonetheless*. It is only when we know ourselves so loved that we can know that "freedom of the children of God" which begins with being set free from ourselves for God. The freedom of the children of God is that they know that God knew them before they knew God, that God's knowledge of them created no barrier to his love of them, and that this means that they need not be trapped by their own poor *or* grand assessments of themselves but may move into the future open to all possibilities, great and small, confident in God's promise to stick by them.

May *this* freedom reign in the hearts of minds of his people this Christmas season!