

26 September 2010

Sunday 26C

Sermon notes:

Galatians 3.6-14

OFF RCL

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

Like me, many of you have probably grown increasingly bored with the ongoing argy-bargy about how the Speaker to the new federal parliament will be appointed. In case you've managed to miss the sorry saga in the last couple of weeks, the government is seeking a way of appointing a Speaker which doesn't reduce its very narrow seat margin in the parliament even more, as the Speaker usually can't vote on legislation. The particular proposal being debated at present is that, should the Speaker come from the government side, an opposition member would be "paired" with the Speaker in such a way that *both* the government and the opposition would be down a vote, preserving the government's margin. An arrangement like this was agreed to by all parties in the negotiations leading up to the formation of the minority government, but the now opposition, arguing that such an "informal arrangement" is unconstitutional, has changed its mind.

The details of the proposal need not concern us today, but the nature of the debate is illuminated by our Galatians text today. Like last week, I want to focus today on the sixth verse of what we've heard today: Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," looking particularly today at the second part: "...and it was reckoned to him as righteousness".

The first thing we have to do here is distinguish the righteousness Paul speaks of from moral superiority. Righteousness here has to do not with our achievements according to some list of moral requirements, but with the strength and vitality of our relationship with God. The difference is an important one. There is, of course, a moral code which comes with the covenant between God and his people, but this moral code comes *after* the basis for the covenant is established. That basis is simply God's *desire* that there be such a relationship, and God's action to bring that into being.

In the terms being employed in the debate about the parliamentary Speaker, there is between God and Abraham is an "informal arrangement". That is, what can happen between Abraham and God does not arise with reference to a formal moral or legal code such as a constitution but is profoundly relational – a matter of address,

agreement and trust. God and Abraham are in right relationship with each other because both desire that it be so. God promises, Abraham trusts, and it is done. Such an informal agreement, to the extent that it does set aside formal legal concerns, is a *gift*. The one party does not *demand* of the other, but *gives*. God does not demand a reason to make the promise, and Abraham does not demand proof that God can deliver. This stands in stark contrast with relationships founded on rules and codes.

In relation to the debate about the parliamentary Speaker, it has been revealed that there are already in place conventions like the Speaker pairing for "pairing" members of parliament who are unavoidably unable to be present for a vote. These conventions are now also under threat for, whatever might be said about the position he has taken, the federal opposition leader is at least consistent here. If informal pairing of votes can't be made to apply in the case of the Speaker, then it also can't be made to apply in the case of minister who is away on government business, for example.

Now, I'm not directly interested in all this in the question of the politics *per se* – who might be "righteous" in this particular case. And given the nature of the beast, there is no reason to imagine that, if the numbers of seats were slightly the other way, we'd have a situation any different, just with all the names of the various actors changed around. But we should note the dynamic. My point here is simply to observe what is happening, and to consider the talk of righteousness through faith against this political back-drop.

For, like most of our relationships with each other, what is playing out in Canberra is a debate about whether relationships are best managed on a basis which is internal or external to a relationship. An externally-based relationship refers to laws, conditions, and so forth which are "outside" of the two parties, and towards which both look. In the case of the parliamentary Speaker question, such a basis is the Constitution, and the question asked here is, "is this legal?" Does it follow on from the predetermined rules of engagement?

What I've called an internally-based relationship makes reference not to statutes or codes of conduct, but to the character of the person we are relating to. The question here is one of trust – can I trust this other to keep her promises? Or, do I *want* to make promises which I might have to keep when a political opportunity presents itself, should I be willing only to break my promises, especially if I can rationalise my unfaithfulness by noting that to keep it would be against the law, or "unconstitutional"?

The advantage of an external, legal relationship is that it limits my obligations to another and is, in a sense, out of my control. There is no true *responsibility* in such a relationship, other than to the rules. That is, there is no *responding* to the other person in him- or herself; there are only the external regulations. The disadvantage here is that neither is there any space for grace. The law is hard; forgiveness makes no sense in the light of the law, for grace which forgives denies the law its proper power to limit or condemn.

Sceptics might proclaim that our parliaments cannot be any different from what they are now – that the adversarial system is the best one for maintaining government scrutiny and accountability. And yet I doubt that there are many who consider the way the parliament usually functions to be remotely satisfactory when it comes to matters which concern us all. The prime minister is in the happy situation that the call for more grace and trust – and less legalistic diatribe – in the parliament happens to accord well with the political needs of the government. So it goes; again, we might well have been having the same debate had the cross benches leaned the other way.

In a sense, of course, the things of the federal parliament are all a long way away. But the dynamic of human relations is not different here from there. There, and here, our relationships are touched upon by the good news of the gospel – that the law does not lead to life, and yet that life is still a real possibility. Or, to put it differently, there is a kind of law operating in God's dealings with us which differs from how we usually deal with each other. For it is very easy to judge according to all sorts of criteria – race, gender, age, education, social status. These are all "laws" which others might transgress, and so be justifiably rejected. And yet these are also the "easy" things to finger, for we're all slowly that discrimination on such grounds is wrong, and we try to be more open to people who are simply "different".

The biggest challenge comes from those who are not that different from us, and so from those we expect to do and to think like we do. For, in their being like us, we expect that they will understand "the rules", and so do as is required of them. It's a strange dynamic, that the closer we are to someone, the more we demand that they be as we expect them to be, and the less likely we are to be forgiving when they are not. To draw on politics again, we expect our political opponents to vote against us, but woe-betide any one who crosses the floor! We can forgive strangers – or at least dismiss them – because they don't really matter that much to us. But when it's one of our own, it's a different matter. The reason Jesus attracted so much opposition was just this – that he looked and sounded so similar to the

Pharisees and others, and yet was so different. He was clearly a wise and insightful rabbi, and yet he continued to break the rules and overstep the mark. The story has it that he wouldn't even stay dead – the law of all laws to be observed.

But it's easy to see the failure in the responses to Jesus. The trick is how it works for us now. Who disappoints us now? Who has not done as we would have liked – and so has broken *our* rules about how to be and what should be done? Where in our lives is there a call to *give*, because giving can only be called for, and never demanded or forced, else it is not gift but still some kind of required legal exchange. God's reckoning of Abraham's faith, and our faith, as righteousness is not merely a "spiritual" thing for heads and hearts. It is a way of establishing a relationship which challenges much of our presumed rules about who is right, and wrong, and why. If we claim that we stand right before God not by what we do but by God's *desire* that we be right with him and God's willingness and power simply to *declare* us to be in right relationship, then we declare that this is how we will also relate to each other, accepting and forgiving where necessary, accepting forgiveness when we need it.

This being done, we then encourage each other in speaking and acting in ways which develop in us the kind of character which others can grow to trust.

By the grace of God, may such grace-fulness be the life and word of his people, and right living the sign of such justifying grace to all who can see. Amen.