

6 June 2010

Sunday 10C

Sermon notes:

*Galatians 1.11-24*

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“For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

This morning I want to focus particularly on Paul's insistence on the divine source of “his” gospel, and what that implies about both how we come to belief, and also the character of belief itself.

Paul's concern in his letter is very strongly put in v.6: that the Galatians are “so quickly deserting the one who called [them] in the grace of Christ and are turning to another gospel”. In response to this, the first thing Paul focuses on is not his argument about what is or is not the gospel, but his status as an apostle. In particular, he insists that his apostolic vocation is not something of human origin but is a sending by God through a direct revelation of Jesus Christ. This point he makes, one way or another, no less than 6 times in the first chapter of the book.

Why this insistence is necessary is not explicit in the letter, but clearly Paul is somewhat on the back foot when a normal comparison is made with the other undisputed apostles. For they had known Jesus before the crucifixion, had received from him a commissioning to mission, and so would seem to be the more reliable when it came to the question of what the gospel was or wasn't about. Paul's gospel could then be argued to be derivative, and so less than the original, and so debatable.

In fact, Paul's problem is not really the other apostles themselves. The specific point which will be argued in the first part of the letter will be whether the Gentile Christians (men) need to be circumcised in order to enter into the full blessing of the gospel. This matter had already been sorted out by the apostles, and the answer regarding circumcision was that it was not required. But the pressures remained strong, and Paul cites an incident in Peter and Paul's own co-worker Barnabas caved into pressure from certain “Judaizers” and effectively declared the opposite of the apostles' resolution on the matter. We may come to more detail on what is happening here in weeks to come, but my main interest here is simply what Paul is doing, and why.

The response we read in the letter, is both to assert the content of what he believes – that is, what the gospel actually is – and to assert his authority in the matter. But the important point is that these are not two things, but are inextricably linked. What Paul knows cannot be separated from how he knows it, for both the knowing and the knowledge itself are a matter of interruption. In contrast, the “human” method of knowing which Paul speaks of is a matter not of interruption but of continuity.

This brings us to the question of belief – what we believe, and how. On the question of how we come to believe, the theologian-philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once drew a very helpful distinction between a teacher and a midwife (in *Philosophical Fragments*). In the model of the midwife, we come to knowledge of something by its being drawn out from within us. As a demonstration of this Kierkegaard uses a story from Plato, in which Socrates “draws out” from an uneducated slave boy the theorem of Pythagoras about the lengths of the sides of a right triangle. That is, without telling the boy anything, but only by asking him questions, the boy is able to deduce something akin to our familiar  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ . The point Socrates (and Plato) wants to make is that everything we can know is already inside us, and simply needs someone or something to help it out – like a midwife helps out a baby.

Kierkegaard contrasts this one with the model of the teacher. On his account, the teacher actually brings something new to the student which the student could not otherwise have known. Now, of course, every teacher will have in him- or herself something of the midwife; but where Paul's distinction comes into its own is in the field of history. For while something logical like Pythagoras' theorem can be derived as the slave boy does within the parameters of the angles and lengths of a triangle, what the slave boy – or anyone else – cannot deduce logically is the details of an historical event. In particular, who a person was, and what happened to her, is something which can only be told by a person who knew the individual in question. You cannot deduce a specific history – someone has to tell it to you – and there is no guarantee that what happens in a particular history is going to be predictable.

But to get back to Paul: for Paul, the teacher is God himself – through the revelation to Paul of the risen Jesus, and this is a profound interruption of Paul's world. It turns him from persecutor of the church to evangelist, from devout Jew (and no doubt also Judaizer himself, given the need) to being willing to eat and work with Gentiles as a sign of the gospel. Extending the notion of interruption further we can see that

the gospel concerns life interrupting death, and the end interrupting the present.

This brings us to the character of believing itself – for it involves just such an interruption. We are very familiar with the distinction often drawn between knowing and believing, but it is not one which does us a lot of good, because believing is usually made to look like a theory set in place for where knowledge runs out. That is, knowing is the stronger partner and believing is a holding pattern until more knowledge comes in to land.

I made reference last week to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and it relevant again here. For every serious attempt believers make to turn what we believe into something continuous with what we know is at the mercy of such very clever rationalists as Dawkins. Because argument – apologetics, as it's known when defending faith – always relies on continuity: if this, then that. And this continuity is where it all falls down, because the very strength of Dawkins arguments is their continuity. The thing which has struck me this week about where Dawkins seems to stand is that he allows for no radical differences in quality, but only differences in quantity.

Thus, for example, whenever he wants to deal with God his interest is fundamentally in whether or not God exists. This is because he understands the alternatives simply to be either that God does "exist", or that he does not. That is, God can only matter if God is continuous with all other things – if God is a kind of "thing" himself. God will, on this account, necessarily be the "biggest" and most complex of all things, but a thing nevertheless. All theology, then, should be something which can ultimately be "midwived" out of our knowledge of ourselves and our worlds.

It is no coincidence that Dawkins discovers and argues that God is simply our own confusions and prejudices, for this is the only possibility which he actually allows. Much more could be said about the poverty of this way of thinking, but the point here is to note its strength, and the fact that its effectiveness as an argument spring from the desire of believers themselves to be able to "explain" their faith. Dawkins "wins" here because he understands better than most believers what is necessary in order to "explain" something, and any real interruption – such as the resurrection of Jesus – destroys the possibility of explaining anything in the way we usually do.

Paul argues that his apostleship shares in the interruption which is the resurrection itself, because without that origin he is not able to bring to anyone anything which they don't already know. Those who argue for circumcision of the Gentile Christians are fundamentally arguing for continuity: as it has always been, so

it shall continue to be. While we might sometimes hope that things will always be as they have been – or long that it might be the case, it is a prospect of which we ought to be terrified. Only for the dead is tomorrow the same as today; the living are caught up in history and, if they are truly alive, are constantly being changed by what history serves up. What happens to us is not always the kind of thing we desire, and very often the opposite. But this is simply to say that even history can have about it a sameness which takes life away as well as giving it.

All that needs to be said is that the gospel holds forth a vision in which change – interruption – is not a threat but truly a source of life: such a change as life in the face of the eternal sameness of death. What broke into Paul's life as the call to apostleship is not simply the task itself but the message: life out of death, being out of non-being.

In order for Paul to speak of such gift, he himself has to receive it – as gift. He becomes – represents, embodies – what he is to speak of. For the gospel is that God gives – that our true self is a gift, which is simply another way of speaking of God's interruption of our lives with something unearned, unexpected, and yet precisely what we need.

For this gift – the messenger who is the message – even Jesus Christ himself, all thanks be to God, now and always. Amen.