

13 June 2010

Sunday 11C

Sermon notes:

Galatians 1.1-5 OFF RCL

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When compared to the way in which we might begin a letter today, it would have to be said that Paul's letter makes an extraordinary beginning.

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the members of God's family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Grand as it is, it is closely correlated to the way in which letters were begun then and so nevertheless not over the top for the time. Even today how we address each other, whether in person or by correspondence, is usually fairly closely prescribed. When you learn a new language, almost the first thing you learn will be how to greet another person, and it is not long before the local rules of letter-writing are also taught.

Even though we are not so full in our customs of greeting today it remains the case that the rules are very well defined, and because of this we are also well attuned to occasions when the rules are broken. And the usual response to the broken rules is at least surprise, and quite often offence – if a greeting is not returned or, more positively, if someone greets us who we didn't expect would. This applies even in the most reduced forms of communication, such as email. An email which comes without at least a "hi" at the beginning or a "thanks" or something similar at the end feels harsh.

We sometimes dismiss the typical exchange of greetings as a kind of necessary "social noise" which has to happen to send and receive signals that things are OK and likely to go according to the usual pattern. But I was struck this week by one writer's¹ observation on the nature of a

greeting, which was that most greetings have hidden within them not simply custom but a *wish*.

To say "Good morning" to someone is not to comment on the weather; it is to wish her a good day, or afternoon, or evening. To say "farewell" to someone is not to dismiss them, but to say "go well; travel well". "Goodbye" is a contraction of an older saying, "God be with you"². The Romans would greet each other with "salvé", meaning "health" (whence our English "salve", "salvation"; cf. French *salut*), and hence expressing a wish for the health of the person met. The same can be found in other languages (French *bonjour*, *salut*; German *Guten Tag*, Hebrew *shalom* [peace], etc.).

The important point about all this is that it changes the meaning of what happens when the customs for greeting are violated. If there is deep in our cultural memory the notion that we are to greet another by expressing a wish for the other's well-being, then to deprive another person of the right greeting is not simply to be impolite but in fact to deprive them of your good wishes or, to get to the heart of the matter, to deprive them of your *prayer*.

For "God be with you" is not simply a "wish" but is in fact a prayer, as can be understood all the other similar greetings. "A good morning to you" is not addressed to *you* but to the one "in charge of" good mornings. In the same way when Paul declares "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ..." he is now addressing not the Galatians but God or, perhaps more profoundly, he addresses *both* God and the Galatians at once.

To break the rules of greeting is to address someone without such a prayer being said or implied, and so is make a demand of them without offering anything in return. It is to overlook that we have a responsibility to wish the well-being of others. In Paul's case there are very serious matters he wants to raise with the Galatians, and he gets to them in the very next verse. But there is no getting past the necessity of beginning as he does: declaring himself, identifying those he intends to address, and binding those two parties together in the speaking a prayer for blessing for the Galatians. To have done anything else than this would have been to contradict the whole point of the letter, which is that the Galatians are in peril of depriving themselves of just such a blessing.

²"...good bye, 1590s, from godbwyne (1570s), itself a contraction of God be with ye, influenced by good day, good evening, etc." *ONLINE ETYMOLOGY DICTIONARY*.

¹ Gerhard Ebeling.

If we push this thinking, then the failure to greet is not simply a matter of impoliteness or lack of civility, at least not in the usual sense. To be uncivil, which comes from the Latin *civitas* for city, is more profoundly a matter of being uninterested, or failing to contribute to the *creation* of the city as a community of mutually responsible and well-wishing persons. The same applies to being "impolite", which is linked to the Greek word for city (*polis*) and can be re-read in the same way.

All of this is to suggest that how we greet each other, and any unwillingness to wish the best for each other, is not simply a moral failure or a matter of bad manners; it goes to the heart of what we are and where our well-being will come from.

I want to bring all this to some kind of conclusion by bringing it into play for two aspects of our current expression of faith – the liturgical act of passing the peace, and that aspect of the creed which speaks of "the communion of saints".

For sometime now we've had a weekly passing of the peace, which has drawn a bit of comment, but which fits very much into the understanding of greeting-as-prayer I've been speaking of here. To say "peace be with you" is not to say hello, but is to utter a prayer, so that the passing of the peace in church is in fact a *practising* of prayer, and a preparation for the serious work of praying for each other. We might almost speak of the passing of the peace as a kind of sacrament of prayer.

And this turning to each other brings us to a filling out of what it means to speak of the communion of saints. It is easy, perhaps even natural, to think of the communion of saints as a given, static community of believers – a *collective* of sanctified persons. But the communion of saints is rather a dynamic communion, a movement of mutual concern in which we address God for each other *as* we address each other. To be with each other is to be the means – the source of the prayer – by which God blesses us.

Much more could be said, but this will have to do for now. But let us seek to become a community of blessing such that, whether or not our language expresses it directly, our speaking to each other is like a prayer with a view to building up of the one we address. Anything less than this falls short of the source of all blessing the Christian knows, as Paul reminds the Galatians: that *Jesus* has given even himself, and so *become* a prayer for us, that we might be lifted out of the mire, to know peace.

By the grace of God may we too be made such pray-ers, and prayers, unto the healing of all we encounter. Amen.