

27 June 2010
Sunday 13C [OFF RCL]

Sermon notes:

Galatians 2.11-21

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

[Edited transcript from recording]

I suspect that most of us have had the experience at one time or another of going back to re-read a book which, at a previous stage of our life was very influential, which changed the way in which we experienced the world, or the way in which we understood who we were and what we are in this world. And yet on the re-reading such a book it can now seem flat and lifeless.

So it is often enough with the reading of scripture, and especially the type of scripture which Galatians is. Paul's letters were "occasional" documents, which is to say that they were written by Paul for a certain time and for a certain people in a certain crisis. And so such things as this great debate about circumcision in the early Church are very much for us a past controversy. We know what Paul said, and we believe it to be true. It all seems very old hat, and yet we continue to read these books, continue to see that it is not our problem and, I hope, continue to wonder therefore, how is this scripture *for us*?

Now the way in which we receive these texts these days of course has nothing to do with circumcision. Martin Luther, implicitly or explicitly, is in the back of our minds as we hear Paul in Galatians and Romans on this theme. For him circumcision is not the problem at all. For him the question is, how might I stand justified before God? How could God possibly justify *me*? Where is righteousness in the relation between the failure within me and the promise of God's forgiveness? Luther was very concerned with his own personal and existential standing before God – what is my path to God?

In Galatians that is not the question at all. The Jews are not wondering, how do I stand before God? As far as they are concerned they know. They are Jews and they believe in Jesus. Their concern is, how can *they* – the Gentiles – stand before God, and their answer is, "they will have to become more like us".

So, to caricature the whole thing: for Luther it is a question of the individual and the internal. For the Galatians it is very much a public, external, communal question. We will be well served not to

cast Luther out but to qualify him slightly and to return to that Galatians question.

We need to remember that the Jewish church – the first church – was basically a Jewish sect. They didn't think of themselves as "Christians" in the way we do, and certainly not over against "Jews". They were thoroughgoing Jewish believers. They held, of course, that Jesus was the Messiah (even though crucified), and that the resurrection had taken place, meaning that the end times had begun. But that didn't set them outside of Judaism; it made them slightly odd, just like today the Seventh Day Adventists are very orthodox except for their seventh day focus, which is slightly odd in relation to the rest of the church. For the first Jewish Christians there was no compelling *universal* significance of Jesus. They had seen Jesus' mission, had heard him say "I am called to the lost sheep of Israel". And though he occasionally encounters Gentiles, for the most part Jesus' mission was not to them at all, and the Jews understood that. There were, of course, events like Cornelius and the conversion of his household which rocked the boat a little bit but the Jews could manage that by saying that God will do what God wills. And yet there is still the Judaistic "circumcision party" as Paul calls them, which says, "We manage God's inclusion of the Gentiles by letting them become *proselytes* – become converts to Judaism". The first Jewish Christians, then, were very interested in the *community*, and in the *identity* the community has, and in *homogeneity* – the *sameness* of that identity.

Now Paul is also interested in identity, in what we have in common with each other. The Jews have said the law, and they focused on circumcision for a special reason, because it is a special kind of law. Today in the church and outside the church we all agree pretty much what the right thing to do might be in any situation. We might debate this or that point, but we are anxious about doing the *right* thing. We agree that there *is* a moral imperative. But circumcision isn't that kind of requirement. It is a ritual, *identifying* imperative. And so there is a focus on circumcision not because it is about about doing the right or wrong thing, but because it is about what we *are*, what our *identity* is. For the Jews the leveller or the common ground is that common identity, indicated by the sign of circumcision. But for Paul the leveller is *Jesus*, and he talks about the type of commonness we known in Jesus in lots of different ways. He says we are all in Adam, therefore we are all in Jesus. Or that just as Jesus died we die, and vice-versa – that we have a common death.

But the important point is that as soon as you alight upon something like circumcision as a basis for a radical distinction, Paul says that it (even "the law") *has to go*. If it marks you off

radically from someone else in a different standing position before God, then it has to go.

This is not lawlessness; the moral thing is still there. The point is the *function* of the law, the function of doing this or that thing, of being this or that thing, which sets me off against somebody else. And so we will be hearing later in Galatians say, it doesn't matter whether you are a Gentile or a Jew, whether you are a slave or are free, male or female – you have to be *one* of those things in each particular case, and there is no apologizing for that, but these distinctions are not to be the basis for our relationships or lack of relationships with each other.

So when Paul brings it down to faith he is not considering Luther's internal struggle, or "my" own righteousness before God. What he is looking for is that which is common ground for all of us before God. It is not that we might "believe", it is simply that Jesus is given as our common standing before God.

Paul was accused of making it easy on the Gentiles by putting circumcision to one side, but in fact he was very much concerned with a difficult reality of God's binding of us all together, of God's calling us *through our very differences* to be with each other.

Faith over against works is about our identity in Jesus. Faith, then, is about *love*.

The way of justification by faith is the way of love; God's love for us, of course, but also our love for each other. Love is both a setting aside of the law's power over us, but also the fulfilment of that law.

When Paul says trust in Christ, he is saying love one another.

By the Grace of God may such a love be ever increasingly known and evidenced among all his people. Amen.