

18 July 2010
Sunday 16C

Sermon notes:

Galatians 2.19-3.9

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Last week, Annette and I saw a movie about which we knew nothing before we went – it just happened to be about the only one which happened to be showing at the time we could get out!

But it turned out to be marvellous. “Exit through the gift shop” is a documentary-style film which focuses on the work of so-called “street artists” – graffiti artists in a more pejorative description – and one particular fellow who spent years following them around with a video camera.

On the surface of it, that’s all the film is about. But attention to the title, and further reflection, suggests that the whole thing may be a very elaborate “sting” operation – not so much on those watching the film but on many of the people who unwittingly feature in it.

The title – “Exit through the gift shop” – is a poke at the sometimes rather cynical invitation to museum and gallery visitors to spend up and buy a bit of what they have just been enjoying, whether a postcard or a T-shirt or a coffee cup bearing an image from the exhibition. An exit which passes through the gallery gift shop is an attempt on the part of the gallery to cash in on the impact of the exhibition on those who’ve been there. It’s as if the “art” is not enough in itself but needs to be given a cash value, and so be reduced to a consumer item.

The twist in the movie is that it moves towards an account of an exhibition by a no-name artist who, with extraordinary publicity and by simply imitating the styles of other street artists, manages to cash in in a very big way on the desire of people either to be associated with the movement, or prepared to spend up big on the art simply as a “smart” investment for the future.

There is a suggestion that the likes of the street artist Banksy, who features as a subject in the “documentary”, actually orchestrated the whole thing as a critique of the commercialisation and cheapening of art.

The point of describing all of this today is simply to note the importance of looking closely at the “text” – here simply paying attention to what the film actually says about itself. The title doesn’t make a lot of sense in relation to the film unless the cynicism is noted, and that then changes what the film might actually about.

This strikes me as helpful when it comes to considering our reading this morning. Every now and then I find myself surprised by what you discover if you take seriously what the biblical text says, and not what we’ve been taught to understand that it says or might imagine that it *actually* says on a quick reading. A case in point is the following verse from this morning’s reading:

...if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2.21b).

As first glance this probably seems straightforward to Protestants who know about justification by grace, particularly as handed down to us by Luther. But if we look closer it becomes less clear what Paul is saying.

...if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2.21b).

This is actually almost the opposite of the account of Jesus’ death which I, and doubtless many of you, grew up on. I learned that God had a plan – we’ll call it Plan A – in which the world was created and we were given God’s commandments in order to live righteously, but that we failed to live according to the law and so became sinners and in need of a Saviour. (Does this ring a bell?)

But notice what this implies: at least in God’s Plan A, righteousness – our right standing before God – *was supposed* to come through our doing the law. Plan A, which didn’t work, is then supplanted with Plan B, which is God’s work in Christ. The implication is that *now* we have an “easier” option, which is “grace through faith”, to replace the original and more difficult keeping of the law. We couldn’t (past tense) get it right through the law, because we are sinners/human/etc., so God has come up with an “out” which finally brings forgiveness which, presumably, God could not give previously.

Recognising the Plan A–Plan B schema is very important here, because if it is correct, then *Paul* doesn’t get it right. What he *does* say is,

if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2.21b).

What he *should* have written is,

if justification does not come through the law, then Christ died for nothing – if the Plan A-Plan B schema is true.

If we are going to understand what it means to talk about being set right before God by *faith*, then we have to see that Paul doesn’t say what I expect most of us have been taught that he says here. In fact, he almost wholly contradicts the Plan A-Plan B understanding of Fall and Redemption. Read properly, for Paul there was only ever a “Plan A”, and it is still in force.

The debate he’s engaged in here revolves around the meaning of “law” for the Jewish Christians, and for Paul himself, and in particular what it means to be *outside* the law.

This “outsideness” is not here a matter of doing the wrong thing. It is rather a question of who has the law, and so who actually *can* meet its requirements. It is clear to the Jews that they have the law, and that the Gentiles do not. The Gentiles, then, are “outside” the law as a matter of definition.

The Jews, having the law, can be said to be “inside” or within the law when they fulfil its requirements – and those definitive requirements of circumcision and the food laws in particular.

This would be simple enough were it not that some Gentiles had received the gift of God’s Spirit and come

to faith in Jesus. For most of the Jewish Christians this is not a problem at all – the Gentiles need simply to finish the process of conversion and become Jews – which is the reason for the debate about becoming circumcised.

But Paul's response is effectively that this is to expect the Gentiles to "exit through the gift shop". If justification is perfected by becoming a Jew – "through the law" – then Jesus dies for nothing, because it's always been possible for this to happen, without Jesus dying on the cross. To require the Gentiles to turn into Jews is to reduce the Gentiles' experience of Jesus to something secondary, and so to reduce Jesus himself to something secondary.

This is not good enough for Paul, but he has to account for why the law is given to the Jews or, to put it another way, why there are Jews at all if it all ends with the inclusion of the Gentiles anyway. What is the role of the law? How can Jesus' work be anything other than a Plan B and so not only something new but now even a *denial* of what God seemed once to demand? Has God remained faithful to his promises?

Paul's answer is that in fact there is an important sense in which the *Jews*, like the Gentiles, have *also* been outside the law the whole time, and it is here that Abraham becomes important. The Gentiles have been outside the law in an obvious way – by simply not having received the commandments. The Jews, however, have been outside the law in the sense that their origins are in Abraham's trust of God, and not in their possessing the law (which came hundreds of years later).

This is the reason Paul insists on Abraham's faith, because it effectively sets the law to one side and, to overstate it slightly, sets the Jews "outside" the law. As such, *both* the Jews and the Gentiles, in their own particular ways, are "outside" the law.

The importance of this – finally! – is that it gives us a way to understand exactly what the death of Jesus achieves.

Jesus dies as a faithful Jew. In this way he dies "outside the law" in that it is his faithful trust of God, reflecting Abraham's own trust, which defines him as one of God's chosen people.

But at the same time Jesus is adjudged by this chosen people as in fact being *outside* the law – no better than a "Gentile sinner" (Galatians 2.15) – "accursed" Paul will later say (3.13).

The significance of this is that, *in the one person of Jesus*, the Jew and the Gentile are both represented – the faithful and the "accursed".

This has two important consequences. The first is that when Jesus dies and is raised, it is as someone with whom both the Jew and the Gentile can identify. Jesus is both faithful (as a Jew after the heart of Abraham) and "lawless" (like a "Gentile sinner"). The death he dies is then the death of all – the death of those "inside" and "outside" the fold.

The second consequence flows from this. When it comes to the question of standing before God, it is a matter of faith, and faith alone, because the law of

itself only divides us from each other. The faithfulness of Jesus is what we believe in – that trusting as Jesus did, as Abraham did – is how we stand securely before God.

Abraham's trust was in the God who promised him a future other than one he could possibly have imagined. This faith is not a matter of believing this or that thing – as a "fact" – but of trusting that there is an end to this world and our lives in it which is not simply the sheer inevitability of our demise.

Now, this has been pretty heavy going – not really the kind of thing which is easy to listen to, and should probably really be *read* and discussed! But, within the constraints of worshipping in the way we do, this is the best we can manage today.

But, if I were to try to reduce it to its simplest consequences, this might be said: there is no Plan B in the works of God. Plan Bs might prove that God is flexible, but the point of the Paul's preaching – and indeed of the whole of the scriptures – is not that God can bend a little if it's required but that God will triumph over the obstacles which are placed in his way, whether they are things of our making or corruptions of blessings God has already given (here, the law).

A Plan B understanding of God's saving work in Jesus both denies such power to God and denigrates the nature of faith by making faith seem "easy" and second-rate. If faith were so easy why does Paul have so much trouble?. Trusting God is no simple matter, especially when, as was the case for the Jews and the Gentiles, it requires that we trust in the company of others about whose particular standing before God we are not at all sure: will they drag us down? For the trust of God is never separable from our relationships with each other. The Jewish Christians were not simply to have faith in God, or to trust God; they were to do this *with* the Gentiles – with those who had always seemed to be part of the problem.

This is very hard to confess – and we have our own very pressing forms of this challenge today.

But the good news of the gospel is that, if this is how God saves us, then none will be lost, for with the saving of the one – whoever it might be – comes the saving of the other – for all are one in Christ Jesus, the one who contains us all (Galatians 3.28).

For *this* promise, and the freedom from anxiety about our standing before God it brings, all thanks be to God, now and forever. Amen.