

# 1 August 2010

## Sunday 18C [OFF RCL]

*Sermon notes:*

*Mark 4.35-41*

*Romans 15.16*

**Rev Dr Craig Thompson**

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In the reading we've just heard from Romans Paul gives an account of his particular ministry, and in particular of his calling to be a "...a minister of Christ Jesus *to the Gentiles*". As we have learned over the last couple of months, we do well to note the "to the Gentiles", for this is not simply an indication of the *location* of his ministry, or even of the ethnicity of those to whom he was to minister.

The controversy we have seen in our potted reading of Galatians revolved very much around the significance of the conversion of Gentiles, and issued in the pressing question, Do the Gentile believers in Jesus have to become Jews in order to enter fully into the benefits of faith in Jesus?

As we have seen, there was a strong movement in the early Jewish church which argued just that. We also seen that the problem was not a moral one about welcoming strangers, but a theological one: if the answer to the question is "No, the Gentiles do *not* have to become Jews", then there arises a serious theological problem: *has God been faithful to the promises he made to Israel in the very beginning?*

The objection of the Jewish believers in Jesus to the unqualified acceptance of Gentile believers was that it raised the question of the righteousness of God. To these objectors God seems, on Paul's account, to be unfaithful by no longer honouring Jewish commitment to the demands of the covenant. Paul's gospel seemed to open up the possibility that God might be fickle. Has God changed his mind? was problem for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles; what if God *is* in fact fickle, and changes plans again?

We have seen how Paul that this was not the case, but I don't want to go over all that again this morning. Rather, let us first note that in fact we don't feel the pain and confusion the Jewish believers in Jesus felt then. *Their* questions about the righteousness of God question are no longer *our* questions, for we have heard Paul's preaching and we are here today because of it.

But we do have our *own* crises as a church today. It does seem to be a struggle to keep the boat afloat. And mighty indeed are the forces which buffet us about. In particular, our crisis is not that there are Gentiles wanting to come and join

us, but that there are not enough of them! We account for this in a great number of ways. Society has changed. There are many life-style options available these days, Sundays are under pressure, we are more affluent (so that it seems that the kingdom might already have come), and so on. Or we might point to the clergy, theology, or preaching as falling out of touch with the wider world. Or we might point to theological and doctrinal failures – syncretism, the loss of a distinct message and so the loss of any real *gospel*. Noting these factors, we may make a number of responses. We moan against society and shake our heads sadly. We renew the ministries of the church with new training, new kinds of people, new forms of ministry. Or we might seek to purify the church.

But noticeably absent in all of this is the suggestion that there might be a question asked about the faithfulness of God. *Has* God left us by the way? Is God as somehow *responsible* for what is happening?

"Piety" forbids that such a suggestion might be made! And yet, as we have seen, this was not so in the first century. It was a serious question the Jewish believers put to Paul, and he took it seriously. Paul's account of the gospel threw the assumption of God's faithfulness into serious question. Or we might consider the psalmist, who knows how to cry out to God – How long Lord? What are you *doing*?

By contrast, we tend to cry out to – or to accuse – the presbytery or the synod of the assembly, or they cry out to the congregations: "what *are* you doing?" That we might actively engage God on this matter is not really considered.

But while we might argue that this is a matter of piety and that we *know* that God cannot be responsible for such a turn of events, I doubt that it is a true piety. It is more that we don't really expect much from God. God's faithfulness is not a matter we associate with the fortunes of the church, because we have not for a long time really associated the previous *successes* of the church with the faithfulness of God.

The Jews *expected* God to bring about the promises. Therefore an apparent *change* in the conditions for the fulfilment of the promises – such as the way Paul seemed to dismiss the covenant – suggested a change in God. And this was untenable. But *for us* God cannot really be the problem, in the sense of being liable for our situation as a church.

Yet I suspect that this is because the church of Christendom – and we are that church – never *really* thought God was necessary for the well-

being of the church anyway. Christendom didn't really know *God* as the reason for the success of the church *per se*; God was more closely associated with the *nation* (or the Empire, in our case), as suggested by that dangerous trinity, God, King and Country.

And so when King and Country left God by the wayside – as they have – God was truly left out of the picture, for the church has largely continued to limp along after the nation in one form or another and not after God.

We cannot think of God as responsible now for the fortunes of the church because we didn't really think of God as responsible for things having gone rather better previously. Therefore, unlike the infant church, *we* do not cry out to God for the church, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing" (Mark 4), whether it is the Jewish believers in Jesus who discover that everything they held dear might have been snatched away, or the fledgling church struggling for survival in the midst of an unsympathetic empire.

What an extraordinary prayer to hear from the lips of those first believers – to question whether God cares! Yet, when things are going badly, it is in fact that *only* prayer which makes sense for people who understand that all they have as a people of faith in fact comes from God, and not out of their own resources or ingenuity. This is not a prayer of last resort but a prayer which knows where everything actually started, and looks for the cause of their life also to be its solution.

There is an important lesson to be learned in this particular kind of faith.

There is doubtless always more ministers and congregations can learn to do, better ways we can learn to do them, and so on, which will make a difference for the fortunes of the church. But the requirement which has always been central to the calling is the faith-sense to point to God as our life when seas are calm, and when they are not.

When they are not – as would seem to be the case for us now – what we need are people of faith with the sense to call everyone else in the boat to look in the right direction, and to be the first to cry out, Lord, do you not care...?

This is not at all an impious questioning, but one which names God's care as the only thing which will make a difference, and looks to see that care again. In such a cry is the faith of the church declared, for our own hearing and for hearing by the world around us.

And it is in God's response to *this* cry that not only is the small vessel which is the church secured, but all the world around is set at peace.

There is nothing more we could ask for, but for more of those who remind us of just these promises, by leading us in our calling upon God.

By the grace of God, may their number ever increase. Amen.