

Psalm 77. 1-2, 11-14

Epistle: Galatians 5. 13-25

Gospel: Luke 9. 51-62

I have to say for myself that when I read one of a number of passages by Paul which includes words like fornication, gross indecency and sexual irresponsibility I go into a sort of cringe state. I want to rush over the words as quickly as I can to get to the bits about love, joy and peace. I don't know about you, but I was exposed to a number of moralistic men - either in person or in print - who could get into quite a lather about such matters and the dangers for young people. It's the kind of passage which diverts one's focus from the whole message of one of Paul's letters to one particular part, becoming a distraction from what is being said. Teenagers are naturally a bit overwhelmed with their own sexual development; they don't need to be told that God has a negative preoccupation with it too.

Former principal of Pilgrim Theological College, Sean Winter, a specialist on Paul's writings stresses that we need to find the key to each of Paul's letters to be able to make sense of them. If we obsess over a small section, or just a few words, if we ignore the context, we will make a very flawed reading.

I have come to understand Paul as a mystic, not as a cranky moralist. And if we read him as mystic then we will read what he has to say here very differently to how we might read him if we think his concern is a moral concern – a moralistic concern.

Paul's concern here for the Galatian Christians is for the freedom of the life of the spirit of Christ and how the spirit's indwelling should be shaping their being in the world. This litany of ways of being which might alarm us and are too easily the playground of moralisers and wowsers, are not a moral waddy with which to beat all and sundry and frighten them into heaven. They are an invitation to us, that if we have put our hand to the plough, and find these things are part of our behaviour or are threatening unity in Christ, then we need to reflect in a spirit of love and kindness within ourselves and our community: what might be happening here? If we find our behaviour driven by jealousy, we are invited to contemplate in love in what way we may not be standing in the freedom of Christ.

So, we might give better attention to things in the passage like enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy – most of which the church has been pretty good at much of the time. These things have strangled too many congregations and result in the loss of members and place significant stress on clergy. The image Paul uses in warning against these behaviours, translated in the NRSV is that of devouring – a strong image. In the Jerusalem Bible, which I asked Janet to read from, it is rendered as: *If you go snapping at each other and tearing each other to pieces, you had better watch out or you will destroy the whole community.* From experience in the Uniting Church, the presbyteries often find themselves having to deal with congregations when members are snapping and tearing each other apart.

It strikes me this suggests behaviour which regards people as objects; objects to be used, consumed, chewed-up and spat out. This is contrary to a spirit of love through which we are able to see the image of God in each other.

We can say Paul is a mystic because in the letter to the Galatians he reminds his readers of his religious pedigree; that he was a pharisee of the highest zeal; perfect in the keeping of the law; a victimiser and persecutor in the name of God; and an inciter of others to commit violence in the name of God. But in Christ, he writes, he has been transformed and, as he says, he counts all his religious heritage as crap. His transformation is not a sort of moralistic transformation – not an I’m-going-to-be -good-boy-now kind of transformation – but Paul undergoes a renewal of mind and spirit in the pattern of Christ; discovering the radical freedom which he reminds the Galatians of.

I am interested in the pattern of receiving the kingdom, or as Paul calls it inheriting it. I’m wondering how we inherit; and what might prevent us from inheriting. Like Paul dying to his former self, it requires the pattern of dying and rising. Of becoming free from a limited sense of self – maybe a self that has been limited or shaped by others’, or shaped by life’s difficult experiences, or simply by a narcissism that uses others – not really able to be in authentic relationship. What Paul describes to the Galatians is a radical freedom; a kind of *I don’t quite believe it*, kind of freedom; always refreshing, always disarming of a small sense of self. Our learned sense of self ultimately becomes an inability to receive or to inherit. We are always in need of being made more free in God. It is a work which is never finished in us. We are always in need of revelling more deeply in this inheritance.

The voice of externally imposed shame, which too many of us are crippled by in our backgrounds, says: *you are not worthy*. And when this is our legacy it makes it very difficult to be free. To receive the mystery of resurrection. Too often our shame is very deep seated and beyond words; placed on us before we could even speak. Too often this shame is intergenerational shame, carried by those before us; of which they were not aware and which they bequeathed to us simply in the air we breathed together. As I’ve got older and I have seen my own children and my nieces and nephews grow into middle age – my eldest nephew’s wife turned fifty this week – I began to see the impact of shame in my family and how this is seen in addictive behaviours of various kinds, especially amongst the men. And many of them have been courageous in dealing with this legacy of shame and in doing so become more whole.

I’m conscious that this stone of shame which gets rolled in our way obstructs the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control indwelling in us. This freedom in Christ is the inheritance of grace which is God’s gift – unexpected, unearned, without price. As we lay ourselves open to this God, may this grace seep more deeply into us so that we free and remain free.

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