

Christmas 1
30/12/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Galatians 4:4-7
Psalm 8
Luke 2: 41-52

Born of a woman, born under the law

Our Galatians reading this morning has been carefully cut by the lectionary to turn it into something which makes it look like a “Christmas” text. And so we hear Christmassy things for the last Sunday of the Christmas season: “...when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman”.

Yet St Paul has no interest in Christmas as we know it. What he *is* interested in is Jesus’ relationship to us. And this ought to matter to *us* as well because unless there is something intrinsic connecting us to Jesus of Nazareth then there is no point in the church honouring him in the way that it does, commending him to the wider world, or celebrating Christmas.

Although Santa is now presenting as a serious rival, the dominant image of Christmas remains that of the baby. We like babies. We once were babies! Christmas reminds us that, as we once were helpless, and innocent, so also was Jesus, and so the sentimental song “When a child is born” has been added to the collection of what is likely to be featured at a Carols by Candlelight or be piped into the background to set the mood in supermarkets. As Jesus was once a tiny bundle of possibilities, and the focus of great hope for his parents, so were we and our babies. When Paul says of Jesus “born of a woman”, we can hear him saying that Jesus was as we are: he was one of us.

Paul goes further, however, in his statement of what Jesus shares with us. Not only is Jesus said to be “born of a woman”; he is also “born under the law”. Here Paul moves beyond basic biology and baby-induced sentimentality to stir us up a bit about our understandings of ourselves. “Born under the law” adds a dimension to human being which is less certain for many of us. It’s not that Jesus’ being born under the law makes him less human; it is rather that we mightn’t be so sure that being “under the law” is a *necessary* part of the description a human being.

‘Law’ here is not merely the divine instruction but what it becomes in our hands, and what other wisdoms and ways of being also become. To be “under the law” in Paul’s sense is not yet to be free; it is to be bound by something which limits us and not yet to have received the freedom still held in trust for us.

Yet while we know that we all begin ‘born of a woman’, for many in and out of the church it is scarcely believable that being ‘under the law’ in this way is also part of what it means to be human. Is not the *freedom* of the individual central to our modern self-understanding? And so Paul’s further suggestion that we are “slaves” – and that we move from being slaves to being children of God on account of Jesus redeeming us from being under the law – also doesn’t really fit our perception of ourselves.

But by reading more broadly around the short section we have heard from Galatians today, we can bring Paul to bear on our own thinking about how we are constituted. The verses which follow on from what we’ve already heard are not so Christmassy, but *matter* at least as much:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods [that is, 'enslaved by law']. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly powers [literally: 'elemental spirits' (NRSV)]?

Paul's particular issue with the Galatians is that they had found a peculiar freedom in Jesus – a kind of human maturity – which they were now giving up.

This freedom involves a shift from living under law: from knowing the rules, being subject to them and abiding by them (or not!), to living out of grace. Paul describes this shift in a little twist which passes almost without notice: “now...that you have come to know God, or rather *to be known by God*...” The twist is very important.

For *us* the question is usually about who knows God, or does not know God – who knows the rules, who has measured where God fits in and how we fit into God. This manifests itself at this time of the year with concern in churches and in newspaper opinion pieces about such things as the “true meaning of Christmas” and who does or doesn't know it and so does or doesn't know God (or doesn't need to know God). This is ‘under the law’ existence – human being as argy-bargy. But *for Paul* the critical point is *God knowing us*, or not knowing us.

God knows you, Paul declares; God has your measure, and this *before* you imagined that you measured and knew God. God knows those of us “born under the law”, enslaved to influences and powers even before we know ourselves as such. In this, God knows us better than we know ourselves.

The good news of the gospel is that God know us in this way, and *yet* loves us. On Christmas Day we sang of Jesus, ‘lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb’. This is scarcely acceptable language today for a couple of reasons but that line sums up Paul's point here, with the emphasis falling on ‘womb’ (Paul doesn't seem to know or be interested in the story of the virginal conception). In the carol and in our reading today, ‘womb’ is a metonym – one aspect of our common humanity which stands for everything which we have in common: our biology and our broken, ‘under the law’ existence. The miracle of Christmas is that Jesus – True God of true God, light of light eternal – is born at all into our human messiness.

What all humankind has in common is not merely our biology but lives lived imperfectly under the law, and so lives enslaved, under the curse of death through sin. For Paul, then, Jesus-born-of-woman has in common with all humankind that he too came to stand under the curse of sin – “born under the law”.

There is, of course, a danger here that the whole sin-thing can be over-emphasised, as it has been too often in the church's history. The *bad* news here – that we might be enslaved in this way – is not the starting point but a kind of end point: it is because a light has already shone for us that we are able to look “back”, as it were, and see clearly now how things were before the light was there, how law enslaved us, how we misuse it to try to save ourselves, how we were unfree.

The *good* news is that this light shines and reveals not to condemn but to liberate. God has already loved us in our very worst moments, and even in what we think are our very best moments but in which we are sometimes the most tragically deluded. Being Christian is a matter of learning to know ourselves as God knows us – *less* than we ought to be but loved *nonetheless*. It is only when we know ourselves so loved that we can know that “freedom of the children of God” which begins with being *set* free. It is only those who have been set free in this way who can become forces for liberation themselves.

The freedom of the children of God is that they know that God knew them before they knew God, that God’s knowledge of them created no barrier to loving them, and that this means they need not be trapped by their own poor assessments *or* grand assessments of themselves.

Instead, they may move into the future open to all possibilities, great and small, confident in God’s naming them and owning them as his children.

May *this* freedom reign in the hearts of minds of all God’s people this Christmas season, and always!
