

Pentecost 4
12/6/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Galatians 2:15-21

Psalm 5

Luke 7:36-8:3

Lost in Translation

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

On this third Sunday of hearing the text of Paul's Letter to the churches in Galatia, and which is now coming indirectly to us, we hear this verse:

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

With these words, indeed with the whole passage from Galatians before us today, we are at the very centre of the preaching and theology of St Paul. Equally certainly, we are also at what has been the same centre of the history of both Catholic and Protestant churches since the days of the sixteenth century Reformation. Then the controversy was that of how human beings might find themselves “right with God”, or - in more technical language - how one could claim to be “justified” before God. We know of Martin Luther's anguished question in the monastery: “*How can I find a righteous God?*” - anguished because he knew only of his failure in experiencing what he was told should be his salvation. And this because of the burden of a religious life lived under the constraints of a required obedience to ecclesiastical law.

The resolution came for Luther, as indeed it has for countless others before and since, in his discovery of a different gospel of liberation found in the proclamation of the Apostle Paul. And ever since, Protestant proclamation has echoed Luther in endorsing a similar individual preoccupation with justification in the face of human sin and guilt, and their counterpoint in redeeming grace and faith.

Although the mature Luther quickly came to broaden his anxious search into a celebration of its proper foundation in the *person* of Jesus Christ, what Luther set in train with his anguished question and his revolutionary discovery five hundred years ago has meant that generations of readers of Paul since the time of Luther have understood that to be “saved” one must “have faith in Jesus Christ”, not in any effort, work, or merit of one's own. Even more, generations have been reminded that it is not enough to give merely *mental* assent to God's work in Jesus. Rather God's work of justification is completed in the individual only through whole-hearted *trust* in Christ, and his atoning sacrifice for sin on the cross. This righteousness, found in one's faith in Jesus Christ alone, is then imputed to the sinner, who is thereby enabled to stand before God without guilt or shame.

Does that sound familiar? At least to those of us over seventy! So we have today's text as a classical location for such a gospel. Here it is again:

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

What is happening here? We can readily see with such a reading why “being saved by faith not works” has been so central to Christian understanding. What is not so clear is where the true initiative lies in this relationship. What has happened in practice is that

Jesus Christ has become the *object* of *our* faith; that is to say, **our** faith is the way in which Jesus Christ and his benefits are received by us as *subjects*.

And to make sure that we have got it, this is what has been called “good news”, gospel.

This story’s deep entrenchment in Protestant theology is familiar to all who have had some minimal induction into our Uniting Church traditions, even if this voice has been more than somewhat muted for the last forty years.

So there is surely some irony in the fact that the unchurched culture around us has now learnt, and loves to sing, about “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me*” sung presumably in ignorance of the costliness of what it was that its author, the reformed slave trader John Newton, was confessing. Perhaps what has become a vacuous “amazing grace” is all that is left of what was once a totally encompassing existential celebration of the Church, whether Catholic or Protestant; the celebration encapsulated in the word: justification.

But now comes the tricky part – so here is where I have to encourage you to take a deep breath and try to hold on a bit longer. It was not always so, this picture we have painted. Early editions of the Authorised Version of the Bible of 1611 followed the tradition since the fourth century translation of the Greek text into Latin - known as the Vulgate - rendered the Greek phrase in two preceding verses in the passage we read not as faith *in* Jesus Christ but as the faith *of* Jesus Christ. So also in the verse before us, the Greek is ἐν πίστει ζῶ τῆ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ: “in the faith of the Son of God”. πίστει is the Greek word for “faith”, “τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ is the genitive, or possessive, form “of the Son of God”. In fact, then, the translation “of” as in “the faith OF the Son of God” is the literal meaning of the Greek words.

More recent editions of the Authorised version, and subsequent translations ever since, went back to Luther’s translation. But if you have a New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and you look up this text you will see in italics at the bottom of the page that “*the faith of...*” is offered as an alternative reading to “*faith in...*”.

The significance of the substitution of the prepositions is monumental. If we were to make such a substitution, we now have this text in a new and quite different form. Here it is:

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith OF the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

See what has happened. Now it is not *my* faith that takes centre stage - my faith which may be confident, weak or non-existent - but now it is *the faith of Christ* that we are being invited to appropriate and to live by. The difference is of considerable moment. We have surely all had experience of a parent, a teacher, a mentor, a colleague who has had faith in us when we struggled to have any in ourselves. And with that assurance, the world changed for us. That is what is at stake when “of” becomes the substitute for “in”.

Why does all this matter? We are forever being told that we live in a post-Christian society, and the accuracy of that acknowledgement is daily being forced on us. Our society and our churches are a long, long, way from Luther’s anguished cry: *How can I find a righteous God?* Who asks that question anymore? Now the cry might well be: *How can I find God?* Or at worst, the assertion uttered either triumphantly by the Ditchkens (the Dawkins and Hitchens) of this world, or at best as a resigned sad conclusion to life’s ambiguous experiences: *There is no God.*

The grim truth is that what we have witnessed in the lifetime of most of us has been the fact that Christianity no longer generates a wider culture of an embodied context wherein faith can be lived as more than an act of individual defiance to the prevailing superficialities of the day. More and more, the place where culture matters most of all – the home, the parish, the community, is frayed and in tatters. Christianity, as it is popularly understood, has for the wider community simply ceased to be life-giving. The mission, the place, the presence of Church which was once at the centre is now ever more marginalised, the ubiquitous coffee shops we pass to get here being the place where “congregations” gather.

But – and here is the good news. While all this is happening we have resources that remain largely untapped. We have tools of which we are largely unaware. The theological advances of the past seventy or so years lie mostly dormant, even to the minds of vocal retired clergy writing in “Crosslight”: those Christological, Trinitarian, and sacramental resources that could readily provide the ground work for a new springtime of faith. There is a secure path waiting for us to walk beyond a present captivity to secular mantras. In a society that is not only all about “me”, but also where faith is understood to be believing a whole lot of things that are implausible, the faith *of* Christ surely trumps *my* faith in Christ every time.

This is why the reconfiguration of today’s text is of crucial significance in the days to come: crucial remember, comes from the Latin *cruxis*, cross-bearing. Such a reconfiguration could achieve a new reformation of equal significance to the old.

We need to be much more aware of all this not least as we wrestle with the legacy of our property, which appears to speak so loudly of a world that has gone. But in the light of our reconfigured text: what about this? And here even preachers find themselves surprised by the implications of their texts. A possible implication is this. The church next door, suitably modified as it has been by the sixteenth century Reformation, was shaped like the ancient cathedrals that preceded it in an age founded on the faith OF Christ, not so much of OUR faith in Christ. What might that mean for the fate of that building for the future if the case we are making holds up? Would our reconfigured text help or hinder what we should do with it in a radically secularised society? That, if nothing more, might surely be an interesting question.

Whatever we decide about the future of our property, this much is certainly true. Our text today is a truly foundational resource. It could once again make faith a lived reality on the ground.

So, with Paul, I offer it to you again in its radically reconfigured form:

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith OF the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

This is a ground quite other than the fragility of our personal faith. This is a ground from which a massively revitalised grasp of the mission of all our churches could be launched. And though other foundations might well be shaky, of this foundation the promise is sure: that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
