

Pentecost 11
31/7/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Colossians 3:6-9

Psalm 107

Luke 12:13-21

Faith without consequences

Most of you are aware that, in the Uniting Church, our ministers are committed to the discipline of using a three year lectionary cycle for mining the Scriptures for God's word for us. One of the benefits of that is that ministers or, more to the point, their congregations are saved from a continual return to favourite texts and favourite themes. The point of the discipline is to encourage us to explore the breadth of the Scriptures.

Even so, each Sunday there are usually four or six texts and, within those texts, it is still possible for the minister to find his or her favourite themes again and again. A certain text will leap up and group the minister is the one which "needs" to be preached on this week, and the other texts are perhaps simply heard or even permitted.

You are also aware that, for the last two months and probably for a few months yet, we have been focusing exclusively on the book of Galatians. This is a self-imposed discipline I've taken upon myself and, of course, have imposed upon you! The problem with that is we run the risk of striking texts which either made no sense, or seem totally irrelevant. We then have either to skip over them or to sit with them until they yield something. Over the last few weeks that has been somewhat to the fore in my experience with Galatians. We've been moving very slowly because Galatians is a very deep ocean. There is a lot to be discovered in here. But it is also a book from a different time and place and so there is a question about how what Paul is doing there for the Galatians in response to the crisis about circumcision - how that relates to us here today. This last week I struggled and struggled with our text along these lines until last night a penny dropped - maybe even a pound, but least a penny! - and on that coin was written this: Faith in Christ has no consequences. That is the gospel for today.

I'm aware that that might seem rather a rhetorical flourish or overstatement, perhaps even an irresponsible thing to say. But you've heard me say before that it is more important for a preacher to be interesting than to be right, so that us explore this interesting suggestion, that faith in Christ has no consequences.

We will do this with reference to the very first verse of text this morning, and in fact just taking up the third word of that text: "Abraham". If you know Paul and especially Galatians and Romans, you will know that Abraham pops up when he is talking about justification through grace and faith. Abraham pops up because he is convenient for Paul's arguments but, more importantly, Abraham is useful to Paul because the old patriarch forms the heart of his *opponents'* arguments. Those who are troubling Paul's community were Jewish Christians. They have come to faith in Christ through the historic line of the covenant. So for them, to enter into the blessings God might give us through the covenant is to be, in a sense, children of Abraham. The question is, How does one *become* a child of Abraham? For those Jewish Christians, the answer is tied up with the mark of circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Paul takes Abraham, therefore, because he matters so much to his opponents. And Paul says, *Read the text*. The text says, Abraham believed – trusted - God and God reckoned it to Abraham as

righteousness. What is important for Paul is that this happens *before* the sign of circumcision is given. So, in fact, what Paul is saying about faith and grace and the relationship of these to religious law is not contradicted by Abraham; it is rather supported by it. So Paul says his opponents: What you think is the strength of the argument is in fact the strength of *my* argument.

Now, we have noted before that what is going on in Galatia is not exactly our problem. We are past circumcision understood in that way. But we can generalise the dynamic of that debate to make it more clearly applicable to us here today. We can do that in this way: for those Jewish Christians who wanted the Gentile Christians to enter the fully into the covenant with the mark of circumcision, *Christ is understood to point us to Abraham*. Paul says No: *Abraham points us to Christ*. This is a summary of the whole debate. For those Jewish Christians what has happened is fantastic: - they have no problem with the Gentiles coming to faith in Christ. But they see this as the *first* step in the blessings; the blessings are secured or signified by entering the fully into an identification with the historic covenantal people of Israel: your faith in Christ points you to Abraham.

Paul says No, that is not a become children of Abraham in the fullest sense. Abraham, in fact, is pointing to what we see in Christ. Paul even go as far as to say, a little later, that Abraham effectively believes in Christ, even though that makes no sense to us historically, chronologically.: Abraham points to Christ. Which is to say, is set to begin with, Faith in Christ has no consequences.

For the Jewish Christians this faith *did* have consequences: get circumcised. This was a logical next step which had to take place. Paul says No. There is nothing to add to what you have in Christ that can take you any further. Now, of course, there are all sorts of caveats we want to have running in here about moral responsibility and such things. These are important but are like footnotes to what Paul is talking about here: faith in Christ has no consequences.

Now, to ground that a little more for us here and now. Faith in Christ does not mean that Christians need a big church building on a corner which is easily accessible and visible to the passing parade. You might have that, but it is not a logical next step to being the people of God. At the same time, faith in Christ does not mean that the church ought to go feral and sell everything up and be church in a bohemian kind of way. We might in fact choose to do that as well. Yet neither of these are logical steps which follow from being in Christ. It is entirely possible that the one or the other - the munster or the feral existence - might in, their own strange ways, point to Christ. This is the hope of the people of God: the things we do actually signify who we are in Christ.

In fact, we can say this about pretty much everything the church might values. Faith in Christ does not point to the liturgy we have here Mark the Evangelist, or to the liturgy we *would* have if the minister didn't keep mucking around with it. That is, there is no particular step which follows from Christ to the liturgy. The liturgy has to point Christ. It may be that certain liturgies do that better than others for certain peoples in certain places and times but there is no specific liturgical consequence which flows out of our being in Christ. And so also in our personal lives: to be in Christ is not mean that you should get married, or that you ought to remain single, or have children or not have children. Any one of those things God can take on and set right, justify, turn into a sign of what it means to be truly human in relationship to this God.

“Faith in Christ has no consequences”. This *is* troubling. We like consequences. If we don't have consequences we are not sure we can be safe because if there are no consequences for me there are none for you and so you might be dangerous to me. We talked last week about the function of law and moral outrage, and how forgiveness and grace differ from that legal way of being.

But, more importantly, if faith in Christ has no obvious consequences, how do we know what to do? How do we know what we should do? Again, this is important for our own congregation at this juncture. We have an enormous number of decisions to make about enormous things. What is God's will here? This is one of those anxious questions which sits underneath our thinking through our property questions. That is, we may well be quite anxious before God in relationship to these things. Will we make the “right” decision? This is a very subtle anxiety. It is shot through our discussions with each other. It is shot through our engagement, particularly, with the Synod.

But the gospel is that there are no specific consequences which flow from our being in Christ. So there is an appropriate “fear and trembling” which springs from the gospel, in that we cannot justify to each other what we have done. And Paul says he cannot justify ourselves before God. So what we have to do is just step forward in trust, as Abraham did: "Go ".

Paul says later in Galatians, For *freedom* you were set free. The more we dig into that, the scarier it will likely be. This is because we like to know that we are right. Yet Paul says we are only right before God because God wants us to be.

While discipleship might be a matter of seeking to do the best we can so that what we do points to the nature of God in Christ, it is also a matter of trust. For, in fact, only God can make the pointing, the sign, work by taking the things that we do - even crucifying the Lord of glory – and saying I can heal, even with that.

Let us pray... Or

Modified transcript from recording