



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday after Trinity Year C 2022

Galatians 5.1,13-25

Luke 9.51-62

By now you will have realised how much I enjoy the TV series, 'Lark rise to Candleford.' Mum and I often watch the DVDs and thoroughly enjoy ourselves. At one point there is a disagreement over the fact that the people of Lark Rise have to pay for the delivery of telegrams. The inn keeper of the hamlet voices their opinion when he says, 'What's right's right and what's wrong ain't right!' Well that about sums up what Paul is trying to tell the Galatians in today's passage.

It begins gloriously with the sentence,

¹ 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'

Anyone who has been set free from something will understand just how glorious that new found freedom is. I remember once taking a party of school children to York. We went on a guided tour, part of which included the ruined chapel of St. Leonard. The guide said that St. Leonard was the patron saint of criminals and indeed he is but actually he is the patron saint of prisoners which can be quite different. A person can be a prisoner of so many things and therefore a victim to them, it might be illness, bullying, mental distress or unfair condemnation, the list is endless.

Now freedom, wonderful as it is, brings a choice. Do you continue with that freedom or do you go back to what led to captivity. Think of the story of Jesus' healing of Legion. The evil spirits came out of him and caused chaos among the pigs and Legion was left free of them. Actually there was emptiness, a vacuum how would it be filled? This is the first clue,

³⁵ 'Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.' (Luke 8).

He is sitting at Jesus' feet and by his actions we know what he has chosen to do.

³⁸ 'The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.'

He filled the vacuum with Jesus; he not only believed, he did something about it, he begged to follow him. There was no moaning when he met with a refusal, just a joyful acceptance of his new commission, to tell what God had done. Of course he goes further, he tells what God in Jesus had done. We will never know how many people turned to the Lord because of Legion's missionary zeal but certainly he is secure in it. Not only is Legion saved from the demons he wins salvation and freedom, through faith in Christ. The same applies to the Christian Galatians. Here in this reading we have the first line of chapter 5 then the passage skips on to verse 13. When bits are missed out it is always very easy to miss what is in fact a carefully reasoned argument.

When Paul went to Galatia he was not in a good way, either he was wounded or ill, certainly not very prepossessing, but the wonderful action of the Holy Spirit within his ministry, his love of God and his clear mission to tell of Jesus Christ won the Galatians to him. They couldn't do enough for him and those who accepted his message did so wholeheartedly. However Paul is no longer with them, he is away from them and this is a letter to them. Things have gone wrong. As I said we have to look back to find a clue to one of those things, this is verse 2.

² 'Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³ Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law.'

So here is one problem. There were some who saw two classes of people, the Christian Jews and the Gentile Christians. OK so far, but some of these people decided that to become true 'children of Abraham,' the Gentile Christians must obey the Jewish law to the letter. The badge of acceptance to that group was circumcision. Having subjected themselves to that in the flesh they are initiated into the group and are now to follow the law to the letter and then they would no longer be second class citizens. To the Jews a Gentile was second class. Do that and all would be ok.

NOT so says Paul, he is vehemently opposed to these people who are leading the Galatians astray. And anyone who turns to that group or obeys them is being led to totally miss what Jesus is.

⁴ 'You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.'

We looked at this argument last week. When the Jewish nation was given the law by God through Moses it was to act as a guardian and guide for them until Christ, the Messiah came; then he would replace the law, there would be no need for it. When a person is adult they don't need a nurse! Jesus is the new way, the new life promised of old. He is the fulfilment of the scriptures. The final covenant is through Christ.

So then that is the danger, the Galatian Christians are being led astray. They will, if they allow it to happen, become slaves to the law and will no longer accept salvation and freedom in Jesus. Paul has given the theological argument previously, now he wants them to act in love for him, to do what he does and commit themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord who loved them so much that he gave his life in love on Calvary. To Jesus who vanquished sin and death and set them free and all who turn to him.

That is the first point, become Jews and you turn your back on that. No set of rules or minor operation in the flesh achieves anything at all; to do that means slipping back into slavery! No, Christ has set you free so ignore anyone who tells you otherwise. The mark of turning to Christ is baptism but faith is not enough in itself it brings responsibilities.

¹³ 'For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

The law is summed up as Jesus said, in answer to the lawyer before he told the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But Jesus goes further as he says to his disciples and to every Christian, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Now that adds a whole new dimension.

All has not been going well for the Galatian church; quite apart from those who were putting pressure on them to accept the Jewish law. No, things were not as they should be. Self-indulgence leads to the list of abominable things which follow, but it is also simply following your own desires not Jesus' way, doing your own thing, having your own way.

Sadly people seem to think that what is right means what suits them at the time, that there is no code of morality. Well there is and Jesus embodied it. 'What's right's right and what's wrong ain't right!' They have been taught about Jesus Christ, about his way of love that is what must guide their actions and it is what must guide the lives of all who call themselves Christians.

What comes just before our passage is this,

¹⁵ 'If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.'

Basically, a house divided against itself must fall. They have been arguing, claiming superiority and wanting to control others and have their own way, a besetting sin. Well that won't do, it leads to oppression and the destruction of the church. It is not the way of Christ, people who behave like that might convince themselves they are Christians but they are nothing of the sort. So here is Paul teaching,

¹⁶ 'Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.'

The Holy Spirit is within you, do not deny it, and do not turn your back on God. Live by the teachings of the Spirit and according to the Spirit and Christ is with you. Flesh here is used in the sense of 'the world, the flesh and the devil', it is nothing to do with saying our bodies are inferior and we should be all about spirit, that false teaching was to become troublesome. No, your bodies must be a temple for the Holy Spirit, is a good way of putting it. But gratifying the flesh, self-indulgence and all that goes with it will lead straight back to the pagan practises the Galatians have turned away from. Paul goes on to explain they don't need the Jewish law to teach them right from wrong, the Spirit, Jesus Christ will do that so do not turn away from him. If you do, the results are catastrophic, and Paul gives that warning at the end.

¹⁹ 'Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.'

The newly perfected order with Christ at its head, that will be brought to fruition in the fullness of time, will have no place for people who behave in this way. It is worth reading the list carefully and not skipping over it. We can I am sure be confident some don't apply but the list is pretty comprehensive, and things like envy, jealousy, enmities, strife and others are still besetting sins and destructive be it in church or state.

Here we have Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit, fruits note, not works. Fruit nourishes feeds and is sustaining and life giving. These fruits of the Spirit, these characteristics are totally opposed to the destructive forces which have gone before.

²² 'By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.'

I have included verse 26 because it is important. As I said in a previous reflection, the bishop in the series 'The Choir' epitomises truly Christian behaviour. When faced with the councillor who talks of an 'elite' the bishop says, 'There is in God's eyes no such thing.' How true and it would do us all good to remember that. We each have our own part to play in the church, in our lives, our jobs but in God's sight there is no such thing as status, only equality and love. We are all children of God. No one says Paul must 'Lord it over one another' (to use Jesus' words), but we must try to become 'the humble servant of all' as he did. Love is the key.

The fruits of the spirit are constructive, life giving, affirming and they are founded on care and compassion for one another, not on self. Therefore Christians promise to 'turn to Christ'; by doing that they put to death selfish desires which can hurt and abuse others. Christians should not seek to serve self but to serve others.

²⁴ 'And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.'

These are the fruits of the Spirit, says Paul. Jesus sent the Spirit at Pentecost and he is within us all; he is our guardian and our guide now. The law is defunct; your pagan ways are over. Turn to Christ and live in his way and become the truly fulfilled human beings God meant you to be. Paul's message to the Galatians holds true for us today and will do forever.

Our Gospel passage does have a similar theme. What has just happened is the wonderful account of the transfiguration on the mount. Only Peter, James and John have been with Jesus. Here Jesus is seen as the fulfilment of the law and prophets, Moses and Elijah appear with him. A voice from heaven, as at the baptism, acclaims him as his Son.

'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'

Jesus is one with the Father. When he comes down from the mount he is faced with the powers of evil. As with the story of Legion, Jesus frees the boy with the unclean spirit. Jesus has control over the powers of evil. Jesus has warned his followers that he will be 'betrayed into human hands' and now he turns his face towards Jerusalem. Jesus has a lot to accomplish before the final battle with evil on Calvary but his whole life is centred on fulfilling God's purpose for him.

Just prior to the gospel reading for today are these words, Luke 9:

⁴⁶ 'An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'

This is one link to Paul's teaching. No one is the greatest; all are equal in God's eyes. This sort of jockeying for position, for status, is destructive. It must not be so with them. They must be as a little child, not childish but trusting and willing to follow where Jesus leads. It's a lesson they must learn quickly. Again the disciples are moaning because someone is doing the will of Jesus, why?, because he is not one of the chosen band. But there are no first and second classes with God,

⁴⁹ 'John answered, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.' ⁵⁰But Jesus said to him, 'Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.'

It is what you do which defines you not what group you belong to. This man is doing the will of Jesus that is enough. Jealousy, status have no part in God's work, they must learn to love, to serve. Having said this, look what follows!

⁵¹ 'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

Jesus is taking the most direct route from Galilee to Jerusalem but it went through Samaritan territory. There was, as we know, an age-old quarrel between Jews and Samaritans. To the Jews the very presence of God was in the Temple in Jerusalem, it was the holy of holies. To the Samaritans the centre of worship was Mount Gerizim (biblical Shechem). Each thought they were right and each despised the other. There was a great deal of friction. Once again this illustrates how destructive divisions can be. It could be dangerous for Jews to travel via Samaria. Nevertheless Jesus does just that. He opts to stay in a Samaritan village, he tries to make peace. They won't accept him but that is their choice. Jesus offers, it is up to people to follow him or not. He roundly condemns the misuse of power advocated by James and John of all people. Where now is their practice of the love, peace and forgiveness he has taught? They have a lot to learn. Jesus simply turns and tells them off but his face is set on the journey. There is a real sense of haste, of the importance of his mission here. He has no time to waste.

⁵⁷ 'As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'

⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' ⁵⁹To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' ⁶¹Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' ⁶²Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

There are many who offer to follow Jesus but also many who fail to keep that promise. The concerns of life get in the way. Here we have three examples but with each they offer to follow however there is a 'but'. I will follow you but first. Now to be clear Jesus is not saying that ties of family are not

important, he is not saying that our responsibilities are not important or that we must all go away and become nuns or monks! That is to misunderstand Jesus' teaching, so let's go back.

⁵⁹ 'To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'

Notice that word 'first', I will follow but first. Actually Jesus says no one and nothing is more important than doing God's will. Look at, 'Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.' Your priority must be God then you look after other people, it should be part of the whole. To neglect others would not be Christian; the two go hand in hand. Actually this is rather like the story of the sower; some fell on the path, it sprang up but soon withered, some fell among brambles but was choked. We get the point. Following Jesus is not easy, being a Christian is hard. It is not easy to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. That is the point Jesus is making, if you want to be a true Christian then Jesus' way must be your guide and those other concerns of the world which continually beckon us to give them our attention are at best secondary and as Paul shows can be dangerous. Love is the key.

Jesus makes it quite clear that God must be the first concern of all who follow him. It is then that people will be guided by his teaching and live in harmony and peace. It is then that worship of God is at the centre of our lives and as St. Paul says, 'For freedom Christ has set us free.' (Galatians 5.1)

'May the Lord Jesus be a bright flame before me, a guiding star above me, a smooth path below me a kindly shepherd behind me, today, tonight and forever.' Att. St Columba

