

Ten minutes a day through Lent

A reading from *Galatians*
a short reflection
ideas how to pray
for each day

**Second week
2-6 February**

Monday 2 March

No More Divisions: We are all one

Galatians 3:23-4:7

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Comment In a wealthy Greek family, a slave was assigned to protect and discipline a child. Children were themselves like slaves. Grown up, they experienced freedom. It was like entering into their inheritance. Now they could speak openly and intimately to their father. For Paul, the move from being under the law to living by faith is like the child's move from slavery to freedom.

The second paragraph includes three memorable sayings and a proclamation. (The order in the letter, confusingly, is: saying, saying, proclamation, saying.) In short, as Christians by faith, we are 1)children of God, 2)clothed with Christ, 3)Abraham's heirs; and so, we are all one in Christ Jesus. No divisions, no exclusions.

When we put our faith in God's Son, both the old Israel and believing Gentiles enter into the inheritance of God's children. The 'works of the law' have nothing else to offer us. We are one, together.

Who, we must ask ourselves, are we shutting out of God's love, today?

Tuesday 3 March

I beg you

Galatians 4:8-20

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. 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 elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you.

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

We keep surrounding ourselves by rules, even though we know that it is not the rules that matter. Then when we break the rules, we feel that we have failed. We become, once again, their slaves.

This is something of a turning-point in the letter. Paul's main argument is complete, From here on, he will appeal to his readers at a personal level. "I beg you...", "Tell me...", "Listen..."

Paul urges his readers to put themselves in his place, to feel his distress at the risks they are running. He recalls their kindness to him when, ill, they cared for him. Yet as he told them the truth of the gospel, so now he is telling them the truth: any attempt to become better Christians through the 'works of the law' will do them no good.

We do not often think of Paul using feminine images about himself, but he does so here. He likens his care for them to the affection of a mother for her infant child, for whom she would do anything, even to facing again the pains and dangers of childbirth. Paul loves his flock.

Wednesday 4 March

The true children of the promise

Galatians 4:21-5:1 *Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother.*

For it is written,

*"Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,
burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs;
for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous
than the children of the one who is married."*

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman." So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Comment Paul is still appealing to the Galatians at a personal level when he presents his interpretation of the Hagar-Sarah story. Although we may find it audacious, there does seem to be precedent for his reasoning in rabbinic exposition of that story.

We would expect Paul's opponents, as Judaisers, to identify themselves with Isaac, and the Gentile Christians with Ishmael. But Paul overturns this (for the Judaisers) comfortable assumption. Even though he has argued that the law imposes slavery on its adherents, we can only be astonished when Paul presents the Jews under the law as the successors of Hagar the slave, not of Sarah the free woman. It is from this surprising conclusion that he draws the allegorical identification between Hagar, Sinai and the present Jerusalem; and of Sarah and 'the Jerusalem above'. Perhaps we should remember that Paul's words were not addressed his opponents, but the discomfited Galatians.

Paul did not use this line of argument again. But he did use his general conclusion: Christ's gift to us is freedom.

Thursday 5 March

Those justified by faith are free

Galatians 5:2-15 Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Comment The content of the first two paragraphs here is similar to 1:6-10. By coming back to the point from which he started, Paul puts a frame round his whole argument and signals that it is complete.

The issue has been Paul's horror that the Galatians should even consider turning from the gospel of grace, justification for all through faith in Jesus Christ, to taking on the 'works of the law'. To do so would be to qualify their faith, to repudiate Christ's gift as if it were insufficient. A little concession here would lead them to rely on their own efforts to get right with God. Paul's crude sarcasm to his opponents shows how strongly he feels.

Far more important to follow the line announced yesterday. For the gospel of grace sets Christians free to live in love with our neighbours. To 'outsiders' of any time, that is a wonderful gift.

But that freedom is threatened from two sides: either a return to slavery to the law; or the slavery that comes from unbridled self-indulgence.

More about this tomorrow.

Friday 6 March

Freedom or slavery?

Galatians 5:16-26 *Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, 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.*

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

Comment Right at the start of his letter, Paul had spoken of “the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself... to set us free.” Yesterday, we read Paul’s reminder that the Christian is set free to live in love with their neighbours.

The key to this new freedom in our relationships is life in the Spirit, the Spirit that the Galatians had experienced at their conversion.

Paul contrasts the freedom of life in the Spirit with the slavery of a life under the constant condemnation of the law, life in the flesh.

Life ‘in the flesh’ can be an eternal failure to live up to the demands of the law. Or it can be the indulgence of lovelessness, through the endless satisfaction of our own desires, without regard for others, human or Divine. Given the preoccupations of our day, it is worth noting that Paul’s vivid description of the self-centred, self-seeking lifestyle does not just mean sex, although it can include it.

Life in the Spirit values ourselves and others on the same high plane. It is relational, upwards to God, horizontally, with our neighbours. The life of the Spirit is neither slavery to the law nor libertinism. It is built on loving relationships, living and active, with God through his Spirit and with others, both as individuals and in church. Relationships happen in community, when we are together, not when we are alone. The 9 fruit of the Spirit are worthy of our attention.

Saturday 7 March

The true Israel of God

Galatians 6 *My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.*

Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised-- only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule-- peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen

Comment Paul gives some guidance about how those who live in the Spirit should, if they must, correct others. They should apply love and gentleness, in the context of relationship. Further, Paul urges, we should look to our own weaknesses.

But the letter was about more fundamental matters. Paul cannot stop his fervour from bursting out again, with a final rejoinder on the irrelevance of circumcision. What matters is that those who, in faith, have died and risen again in Christ are a new creation, the true Israel of God.

One Prayer

Pick up one thought from the reading and bring it before God as a short prayer.

It need not be complicated. God understands what we try to say to him.

One Thought

Think about the issues raised by the reading. What could it mean for me? Is this the way the world is, or the way the world might be? Carry the thought with you through the day and try to remember it before you go to sleep.

One Thank-you

Find something in the reading that you can thank God for. Try to be explicit, however little it may seem. Then thank God for it, just as you would thank someone who gave you a gift.

Sum it up

*Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted
forty days in the wilderness
and was tempted as we are, yet
without sin:
give us grace to discipline
ourselves in obedience to your
Spirit;
and as you know our
weaknesses,
so may we know your power to
save;
through Jesus Christ your Son
our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.*

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name;
your kingdom come;
your will be done
on earth, as it is in heaven.*

Give us today our daily bread.

*Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin
against us.*

*Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

*For yours is the kingdom and the
power and the glory forever*

DMW

23 February 2020