



Paul to the Galatians: Our freedom in Christ

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Following our celebrations of the Feast of Corpus Christi in Year C, our Sunday Second Readings are taken from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Peter Edmonds SJ guides us through the passages that we will hear from that dramatic and emotional letter, in which we encounter Paul as a storyteller, a theologian and a pastor.

You welcomed me as an angel of God. . . Had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. (Galatians 4:14-15)

In no other letter does Paul write so positively of the reception afforded him on his missionary journeys. We are not sure who these people were who gave him such a welcome. They may have been inhabitants of the province the Roman authorities called Galatia, where, according to Acts 13-14, Paul travelled on his first missionary journey; or they may have been people who lived to the north of the province who called themselves 'Galatians' (3:1). But now, 'because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us' (Galatians 2:4), there were problems. The success of Paul's whole mission was in jeopardy. In addition, Paul was being portrayed as a fraud, because he had preached without a mandate from the leaders of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. His claim to apostleship was being condemned as mendacious. The Letter to the Galatians represents Paul's response.

This Letter to the Galatians is the last of Paul's so-called undisputed letters from which the second readings in the three-year cycle of our Sunday liturgy are taken. It would be a pity to consider it as a sort of afterthought, because it raises issues about Christian belief and behaviour which are still relevant for our own time. In these Sunday readings, we only have six



brief extracts, but these bring us into the world of early Christian controversy and remind us that even in the early years of Christianity there were divisions. Paul approached pastoral problems theologically. In this letter, he comes across at his best as one devoted to the person of Christ with a clear understanding of the effects of his passion and resurrection and its consequences for Christian behaviour.

Because we only hear Paul's side of the dispute, it is worthwhile to list some of the arguments his opponents may have used. They treasured the Jewish law and customs which they believed went back to Abraham and Moses. They pointed to what are sometimes called 'badges' which distinguished them from the nations around them. Three, especially relevant to this letter, were highly regarded: the custom of circumcision for all men, particular laws regarding food, and the observance of certain holy days. They could argue that it was through faithful observance of such customs that they had been able to preserve national identity and fidelity to their God over the thousand years during many of which they had been subject to foreign powers. They had remained a people in their own right and had not been absorbed. They were truly a 'priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). The consequence was that if others wanted to claim membership of God's own people as Christians (1 Peter 2:9), they needed to observe the same customs.

Paul, they claimed, had admitted converts and ignored these traditional demands. The gospel he preached was a half-baked gospel. His converts had been deceived, and if they wanted to become genuine members of God's people, they had to respect the traditional law in full. Trumping their argument, they criticised and condemned Paul himself. He had no right to admit converts at all, because he had not been appointed apostle by Christ. Paul had not known Christ in the flesh, nor was he authorised by those who had been appointed by Christ. James, Cephas and John were pillars of the church; Paul was not among them (2:9). Paul realised that if the arguments of these opponents were accepted, then his missionary work would have been in vain. The death and resurrection of Christ would have no meaning; 'Christ died for nothing' (2:21).

Paul responds to the crisis in three stages. In the first part, Paul tells his own story. In the second part, he sets out the theology which underlies his position. He does this in the context of a somewhat brutal encounter which he had had in Antioch with Peter the apostle. In the third part, Paul is at his most practical, as he addresses the issue of how one is to lead a moral and Christian life if one is free of the demands of the traditional law. We concentrate on the six extracts from the letter appointed for our Sunday readings.

Paul's calling and gospel (9th Sunday of Year C – Galatians 1:1-2, 6-10)

This initial greeting is special and important. Paul begins his defence of himself and his mission by naming himself as an apostle and by giving the grounds for his claim to the title. His apostleship did not come from any human authority but directly from Jesus who was the Christ, and from the God whom he knew as Father, the one who had raised Jesus from the dead. We note at once his appeal to the paschal mystery.

He writes not just on his own behalf but on behalf of all 'the brethren' with him. He writes to the 'churches' of Galatia. This title meant that he is addressing them as authentic assemblies of the people of God. So from the start he establishes the genuineness of his apostolic office and reassures the Galatians of their identity.

Normally in Paul's letters, a thanksgiving passage follows the greeting, but here he expresses astonishment. He accuses his opponents of being agents of confusion and of perverting the gospel. In doing so, they deserved a curse, an *anathema*, and he repeats this. If Paul were to give in to them, he would no longer be a slave of Christ. He might win popularity from a human audience, but he would not please God. He would no longer be a slave of Christ.

In the [Letter to the Romans](#), which treats many of the same themes as Galatians, but at much greater length, Paul introduces himself as a 'slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle' (Romans 1:1), the titles with which he begins this letter and ends this paragraph. Here we find Paul at his most emotional. It anticipates the sort of language he uses in his so-called 'fool's speech' in his Corinthian correspondence (2 Corinthians 11-12).

Paul's missionary career (10th Sunday of Year C – Galatians 1:11-19)

This passage is important in at least two respects. In the first place, it constitutes the first part of Paul's defence. What Paul has been doing in his preaching is a continuation of his own grace story. He speaks of a direct call from God, which he calls a 'revelation'. He echoes biblical language. Like the prophet Jeremiah, he was called before he was born (Jeremiah 1:5). So confident and convinced was he of this vocation that he saw no necessity to seek formal approval for his mission.

Nonetheless, after three years he had been in touch with Cephas (Peter) in Jerusalem; his visit was brief, just fifteen days. He also met James, 'the Lord's brother'. He will later inform us that fourteen more years passed before he returned to Jerusalem (2:1). Whatever he was doing clearly met with their approval. So his opening arguments are based on his own story and especially on his relationship with the Jerusalem authorities. It is likely that here Paul is giving his own version of the events which Luke describes in rather different language as taking place at the 'Jerusalem Council' (Acts 15:1-29).

This passage has further significance because its appeal to Paul's divine call provides an alternative version to the conversion story which we find three times in the Acts of the Apostles (9:1-19; 22:4-16; 26:9-18). Because it is so much earlier than those accounts, it should take priority in any study of [Paul's conversion](#).

Theology for Peter (11th Sunday of Year C – Galatians 2:16, 19-21)

We now move into the 'theological' part of the letter. Paul has just referred to the so-called Antioch incident in which he had 'opposed [Cephas] to his face' because at meals he had separated himself from Gentiles for fear of the 'circumcision faction' (2:11-14). Previously, Cephas 'used to eat with the Gentiles' (2:12). Now it seems he had been persuaded to join those who wanted full observance of the traditional law.

The words we hear today may well have been spoken by Paul to Cephas on that occasion. They repeat what Paul believes to be the core of the Christian message: 'We have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law' (2:16). We find a similar summary in Philippians where Paul confronts similar opponents (Philippians 3:9).

Theology for Paul cannot remain on an abstract plane. He concludes on a personal level and bequeaths us one of his best known declarations: 'I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is 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' (2:19-20). Theology expressed in such intimate terms reminds us that Christianity is no book religion but a commitment in faith to the person of Christ.

Clothing in baptism (12th Sunday of Year C – Galatians 3:26-29)

Continuing his theological arguments, Paul makes one of the few references to baptism in his letters. Baptism is a ratification of our faith. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul compared baptism to a death and a rising from the tomb (Romans 6:3-4). Here he speaks of it in terms of the new clothing which the newly baptised person puts on. These new garments, worn when coming out of the water, signified the person of Christ.

This led Paul to the sentence possibly quoted more often than any other in the letter: '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'. Let us understand this correctly. Distinctions remain, but the point is that when God looks at the newly baptised in their white garments, whoever they are, he only sees his Son. All are now 'children of God'. Like Paul, it is no longer they who are living, but it is Christ living in them (2:20).

And we must not neglect the final sentence of the passage which speaks of Abraham's offspring. Paul is convinced of the continuity of God's plan. The coming of Christ did not cancel the past but ratified it. Earlier in this chapter, Paul has already argued that [Abraham's faith](#) is a model for our own (3:6-14). He will repeat this argument at greater length in Romans (4:1-25).

For freedom Christ has set us free (13th Sunday of Year C – Galatians 5:1, 13-18)

We now move into the third part of the letter which deals with questions of Christian morality. Having established that faith in Christ is the way to salvation and that to follow the demands of the law was to walk into a cul-de-sac, Paul now examines the consequences of all of this for our day-to-day behaviour. Freedom from the Mosaic law must not lead to licence and anarchy. Rather it offers us a life in which our conduct is dominated by love and the Holy Spirit.

These are the two key terms of our passage. Paul puts forward 'love' as the first safeguard of the freedom from law that Christ has won for us. Earlier in the chapter, he has written that, 'in Jesus Christ. . . the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (5:6). Paradoxically, the freedom which we enjoy in Christ leads into the slavery that is the result of genuine love. The lover is a slave of the beloved, and here we meet one of the rare correspondences of Paul's teaching to the gospel message of Jesus. Jesus had insisted that the one commandment was love of God and neighbour (Mark 12:30-31). Luke gives the best commentary on this in his parable of the [Good Samaritan](#) (Luke 10:30-37).

The second key word is 'Spirit', which is opposed to flesh. Flesh in Paul refers to the all-too-human way of living for oneself. It is unfortunate that our reading stops here, because Paul obligingly provides a list of the behavioural consequences of living for oneself and then, refreshingly, a list of the consequences of what he calls the 'fruit' of the Spirit. At the top of the list is love, and eight other qualities of Christian life follow, namely 'joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (5:19-25). A fine commentary is found in the 'hymn to love' of 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

A new creation (14th Sunday of Year C – Galatians 6:14-18)

Our final extract consists of the concluding verses of the letter. Jesus Christ is now called 'Lord', a reminder that for the Christian, the emperor in Rome was subordinate to Christ. At the letter's beginning Paul spoke of the resurrection; now at its end we hear of the cross. This Easter event of the death and resurrection of Christ, not observance of the Jewish law, is the source of our salvation. The marks that Paul bore on his body as a result of the various floggings he had endured were marks of the cross he shared with his Lord (2 Corinthians 11:23-25).

Now Paul inserts one of his metaphors that sum up the results of the paschal mystery: we live in a 'new creation'. God has created the world anew through Christ. Paul uses similar language when writing to Corinth (2 Corinthians 5:17). His promises have come to fulfilment. His final sentence echoes his initial greeting by referring to the grace, the free gift, of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are all invited to join in the *Amen* which is the last word of the letter.

In this brief survey, we have mostly confined our remarks to those passages read out in the liturgy as an encouragement to congregations to encounter a document dating from at least a decade before the written gospels began to appear. They are proclaimed over a six-week period, a time which offers opportunity to grow familiar with the letter as a whole. It can be read in three instalments referred to earlier – chapters 1-2 give us Paul's story, chapters 3-4 his theology and chapters 5-6 his directions for Christian life. Much of the material receives treatment at greater length and depth in the Letter to the Romans, but the atmosphere in Galatians is more dramatic, picturesque and emotional.

Sunday Mass-goers have waited almost three years to hear this letter. Daily Mass-goers will hear nine more extracts beginning in the 27th week of Ordinary Time. Those who read, study and pray it, will surely find themselves rewarded with stimulus and encouragement for their Christian lives. They can ask themselves how far they live out the vision of this letter. Do they in their lives recognise the action and revelation of God? Is [Paul's vision](#) of Christ their vision? How far is love and the action of the Holy Spirit the inspiration of their lives? Paul himself expresses his hope for them in his conclusion, that they will enjoy peace and mercy because they belong to the 'Israel of God' (6:16). Like the Galatians of old, they are to welcome Paul as an 'angel [that is, a 'messenger'] of God' (4:14).

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