

Sermon for the Third Sunday After Pentecost

The doctrine of justification by faith has been central to Christian theology, at least in the West, since the European Reformation. In popular thought this is usually expressed as being "saved through faith in Jesus Christ" and we find three such phrases in this week's passage from Galatians:

...."We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but **through faith in Jesus Christ.**"...." we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be **justified by faith in Christ,**..." The life I now live in the flesh I live by **faith in the Son of God,**...

The underlying Greek phrases can be translated as we see here in the NRSV, but it has also been observed by scholars that a more natural meaning in the original Greek is better expressed by phrases such as:

- through the faith (faithfulness) of Jesus
- justified by the faith (faithfulness) of Christ
- by the faith (faithfulness) of the Son of God

There is continuing debate about the best way to translate these terms, but it is clear that two very different emphases are involved. In the traditional translation since the Reformation, the emphasis falls on the faith (trust) which the Christian directs towards Jesus. In the alternative translation (which seems to reflect the meaning of the original Greek in its ancient context), the emphasis falls on the faith that Jesus practiced, or the faithfulness of Jesus, as the ground of salvation. The case for the less familiar translation is strengthened when we notice that in Romans 4, where we find similar ideas and terms used by Paul, the salvation flowing to the Jews on the basis of Abraham's faithfulness is contrasted with the faithfulness flowing to all people on the basis of Jesus' faithfulness. (The Faith Futures Foundation)

I find Good News in this translation for salvation is not something given to me because of the strength of my faith or my works, but by the faith and faithfulness of Jesus. As William Loader writes, Paul was not jettisoning the scripture. He appeals to it regularly. His argument is that Jesus is the one who brings us into a right relationship with God (justifies us) and this offer of a

right relationship stands in its own right. It is not dependent on our fulfilling the requirements of biblical law. It is a matter of accepting the offer of that relationship and so entering a new relationship with God.

God offers a relationship of ongoing love to all without discrimination and that neither entry into this relationship nor continuing in it is dependent on qualifications or levels of adherence even to biblical law (the latter puts him in conflict with most Jewish Christians and Jews of his time). Paul makes this so central that it relativizes all else, including scripture itself, although he argues that it is not inconsistent with underlying values of scripture. Anything which conflicts with the central insight of love in right relationship has to be set aside, even if it is biblical, because, he would argue, the more fundamental biblical insight must always overrule what appears on the surface of its pages. Circumcision discriminates; God does not; it must go. Food laws discriminate; God does not; they must go; and more. In our time, what do we see that discriminates that “must go?”

What Paul saw in Antioch and is now hearing about from Galatia must, to his mind, undermine the thoroughgoing compassion and inclusiveness of the gospel. It was perhaps more dramatically obvious in Antioch than it was in Galatia, but Paul knows that in both instances it is inspired by a spirituality which places greater emphasis on issues of authority and correctness than on what achieves loving and right relationships. We can see that our spirituality divides the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church, and many denominations today.

One of the observations of the focus groups at St. Andrew’s is that there is a new awareness of the importance of relationships in a community of faith. We might call them circles of love whose image usually appear on Celtic crosses. One of the precious gifts to the Episcopal Church since its beginning has been Celtic spirituality. As J. Philip Newell writes in *Celtic Spirituality: The Healing of Creation*, “Celtic spirituality is more poetic than doctrinal. Belief is pointed to rather than defined. And the ancient Celtic mission did not have a theological headquarters like the Vatican in the imperial mission to impose orthodoxy from the Center.

As I have painfully watched the results reported to us of the oil spill in the Gulf, I am haunted by Newell’s quotes of Julian in *Celtic Spirituality: The Healing of Creation*: “God ‘is in

everything,' writes Julian (of Norwich). God is 'nature's substance,' the very essence of life. So she speaks of 'smelling' God, of 'swallowing' God in the waters and juices of the earth, of 'feeling' God in the human body and the body of creation. And she insists, as the Celtic tradition has done..., that nature and grace are one. They move in harmony...." As I think of the tragedy in the Gulf, I ask can the harmony of nature that we destroy be restored?

My prayer for us as a community, a church, a nation, and a planet, is that we hear as Julian that "we all are one." "We have come from God as one, and to God we shall return as one. And, any true well-being in our lives will be found not in isolation but in relation. She uses the image of the knot, (found on the cover of your bulletin adorning the cross) and loved by Celtic artists over the centuries, to portray the strands of time and eternity intertwined, of the human and the creaturely inseparably interrelated, of the one and the many forever married. Christ's soul and our soul are like an everlasting knot. The deeper we move in our own being, the closer we come to Christ. And the closer we come to Christ's soul, the nearer we move to the heart of one another. In Christ, we hear no foreign sounds but the deepest intimations of the human and divine intertwined. I believe that the Apostle Paul delivered this message to those ancient ancestors in Galatia remembered today as Celts.