

## **Free living**

*Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010*

**Text:** Galatians 2:15-21 (+ Luke 8:26-39)

Hearing comments from the congregation after I have preached is a very thought provoking and educational process. Last week was no exception. Some thought that my sermon was a bit long. It was; sorry about that. I'll see if I can do better this week. Others told me that it was thought provoking. That was good, because I was indeed trying to provoke thought. But I was disappointed that no one told me that they were provoked to have the one thought that I had hoped to provoke – no one accused me of promoting moral anarchy. You see, what I said last week was this:

‘For Paul, the logic of the cross of Jesus was as simple as it was powerful. If God so clearly vindicated a man who, by the way he died, had handed back his Jewish passport, then all the rules have to be rewritten: Jewish exclusivity is no longer an option: In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything ... (5:6) The rule now is that there is no rule ...’

That was what I said last week. Was I not, then, promoting a kind of lawless liberalism? I had hope that at least one of you would accuse me of being a lawless libertine, because I remember quite clearly what one respected preacher once said to me – ‘If you have been preaching for some time, and no one has ever accused you of preaching lawlessness, then you haven't been proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus clearly enough!’

Back in the first century, some of Paul's Jewish listeners certainly thought he was promoting lawlessness. We can see how they got this idea from the passage in Galatians we heard today. In Galatians 3, Paul claims that

... 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 ... (3:24-25)

In other words, the law only had a transitory function, as a ‘disciplinarian’, or ‘school master’, as older versions say. Now that Christ has come, we have grown up, and have no use of the Law any more. The Law went out of the window with circumcision. That's the freedom that

Paul was talking about at the beginning of Chapter 5, ‘For freedom Christ has set us free.’ (5:1) The implication seems to be that without the law, ‘anything goes’ – Paul is the ‘apostle of free living’! Some of Paul’s first listeners certainly drew that conclusion: the Gospel was their passport to the equivalent of the ‘swinging sixties’ – nothing is forbidden, everything is permitted. That is why later in Chapter 5, Paul has to issue this warning:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence ... (5:13a)

The implication is clear – some indeed heard Paul’s Gospel as lawlessness – everyone is free to do everything! By the criterion set out by my preacher friend many years ago, the fact that Paul was *misunderstood* as preaching lawlessness means that Paul *was* indeed preaching the Gospel of freedom properly.

Paul was, of course, following in the footsteps of his Master. Jesus was constantly accused of promoting lawlessness by his association with all kinds of undesirables, the ‘sinners’ whom the Pharisees would want to exclude from the people of God – tax collectors, prostitutes (remember last week’s Gospel reading), Samaritans, and, even uncircumcised Gentiles – as we see from today’s reading (the swine herd alone tells us that we are in Gentile territory!). By openly associating with such ‘rejects’ from the Law, Jesus was indeed inviting the accusation of being lawless himself. Paul proudly proclaimed such behaviour as Christian freedom. No wonder he was also accused of being a lawless libertine. No wonder he found himself, as he tells the Galatians at the end of his letter, ‘[carrying] the marks of Jesus branded on my body’ (6:17b). He was persecuted for being the ‘apostle of free living’.

Paul therefore devotes much of Galatians to explaining what exactly he means by Christian freedom. A pithy summary of this teaching occurs in our reading today:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (3:27)

‘You have clothed yourselves with Christ’, or, as some other versions have it, ‘you have put on Christ’. It is a powerful and suggestive metaphor for the sacrament of baptism, and of what being a Christian is all about. But what does it mean? It seems to me that for Paul, being ‘clothed with Christ’ or ‘putting on Christ’ means, above all, being filled with the Spirit of Jesus:

God has sent the Spirit of [God's] Son into our hearts, crying  
'Abba! Father!' (4:6)

We have 'the Spirit of [God's] Son' in our hearts. That is why we can call God 'Father'. The first few words of the Lord's prayer so often slips past our lips before we notice them, 'Our Father, who art in heaven ...' As far as Paul is concerned, anyone who can call God Father without embarrassment has the Spirit of God's Son in his or her heart. And any one who has the Spirit of God's Son in their heart lives a new kind of life:

If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. (5:18)

In other words, a spirit-filled Christian is no longer living a life determined by *external constraints* – 'the law'. Instead, he or she is energised by an *inner compulsion*. That is what is meant by being 'led by the Spirit'. Another way of putting it is that we are no longer seeking to *do* the 'works of the law', a matter of following external rules, which always end up being exclusive of others; rather, we are looking to bear what Paul famously calls 'the fruit of the Spirit' (5:22), love, joy, peace, etc.

Notice the organic metaphor of 'fruit' – it is the product of a new kind of *life*. Paul says that 'there is no law against such things.' (5:23b) We may well add that there is no law that can decree or produce such things. That is one of the implications of being 'free from the law'. But, says Paul, this is not 'an opportunity for self indulgence' (5:13), because we are now living according to an inner compulsion, coming from having 'the Spirit of [God's] Son in our hearts'. This inner compulsion bears wholly differ fruit,

[which] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,  
faithfulness, gentleness and self control. (5:22-23a)

We can go on exploring spirit-filled living in depth. But I promised you a short sermon. So I'll desist. Instead, let me end by fulfilling a promise I made last week. You will remember that last week, I brought up the Bishop's challenge to us on Trinity Sunday, that we as a church should listen to God and ask questions. I then asked a question arising out of God's word to us in Galatians last week: 'What is the one thing that we cannot conceive of St. Peter's not doing?' I suggested that answering this question was a helpful way of identifying the 'sacred cows' in our midst, our equivalent of the issue of circumcision for Paul's listeners. Such

‘sacred cows’ always end up enslaving us and turn us into an exclusive club rather than the Church of Jesus Christ.

I promised to ask one more question this week. Here it is. Has St. Peter’s ever been in danger of being accused of lawlessness in its 150 year history? In other words, have we ever been *so* inclusive that others have raised eyebrows? Or, to put it yet another way, have we been so open to accepting the rejects from the many ‘exclusive clubs’ in our society that we are accused of not having any standards at all? If so, then it is probably a sign that we are indeed learning to be ‘led by the Spirit’. Or have we always been so ‘proper’, so ‘respectable’, that, no one has ever dreamt of accusing us of being ‘libertines for Christ’? In that case, by the criterion of my preacher friend, we have probably never really preached and lived the Gospel of Christian freedom properly. Or in Paul’s words, we may be, both corporately and individually, still living by the ‘works of the law’, and not being ‘led by the Spirit’. It is a serious question to ponder.

Let us pray.

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace, here the love of Christ shall end divisions. ||: All are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone to heal and strengthen, serve and teach and live the Word they've known. Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face. Let us bring an end to fear and danger. ||: All are welcome (3 times) :|| in this place.

Amen.