

Cry freedom

Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 13th June 2010

Text: Galatians 2:15-21

All the greatest words written or spoken in history about human freedom were born of conflict. The *Magna Carter* of 1215, the founding document of parliamentary democracy, was the product of a quarrel between King John and his barons. The *Declaration of Independence* adopted by the Continental Congress in 1776, was the result of mounting grievances against the British Crown felt by American colonists. A defining moment in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was Nelson Mandela's opening speech from the dock at his 1964 trial: 'I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society ... It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.'

For me, Paul's letter to the Galatians is the founding document of the Christian church. Predated in the New Testament only by 1 Thessalonians, and written barely 20 years after the death of Jesus, Galatians is the *Magna Carter* of Christianity. It constitutes the church's *Declaration of Independence* from Pharisaic Judaism. In it, Paul bids for the freedom of his spiritual children, 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.' (5:1)

Like all other 'cry freedom' speeches and documents in history, Galatians was born of conflict. Fierce argument erupted among the Jewish community soon after the death of Jesus. His followers started telling everyone that their master was the long-awaited messiah. For Paul, this was impossible. Jesus died of crucifixion; and, as Paul reminded the Galatians (3:13), the Jewish bible was very clear on this issue: 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.' According to the book of Deuteronomy (21:22-23), a dead man hanging on a tree 'defile[s] the land' and is 'under God's curse'. Jews living under Roman rule had long applied this text to crucifixion. How, then, can Jesus be the Messiah? His death had made him unclean and lost him his Jewish passport.

To Paul, the 'Jesus is Messiah' message was simply preposterous. He was passionately committed to stamping it out, as he reminded the Galatians:

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. (1:13)

The argument about Jesus had turned into a life and death conflict. Paul was a turncoat in this conflict, because something happened to him while he was travelling to Damascus to arrest Christians. Paul encountered the risen Jesus, who ordered him to change sides. It was this turncoat who wrote to the Galatians in around 50 A.D.:

Paul, an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead ... To the Churches of Galatia. (1:1-2)

For Paul, the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead changes everything. You see, before Paul's Damascus Road experience, he and the Christians he persecuted agreed on one thing: Christianity was a Jewish affair. The early church, with its headquarters in Jerusalem, proclaimed that Jesus was the *Jewish* messiah, fulfilling God's age-old promise to God's people, the Jews. Most, if not all, of the early followers of Jesus were Jews or converts to Judaism. Paul passionately believed that this Jesus stuff was heresy, *Jewish* heresy, and wanted to purge it from Judaism. But they both agreed that this was a debate about how to be *Jews*: a race chosen by God to be holy. And 'holy' here has its root meaning of being 'separate', separate from the Gentiles. This separateness was expressed in various ways, but especially by keeping distinctive food laws, and most especially by the practice of circumcision. If a Gentile wanted to share in the blessings of being God's people, he had first to be circumcised.

Paul and the Jerusalem Church agreed on these points. What Paul could not stomach was the Church's insistence in proclaiming a crucified criminal to be the Jewish messiah. Crucifixion – hanging on a tree – was ritually unclean; it defiled the land. How can a crucified criminal be the messiah of a ritually clean people of God?

That is why Jesus' resurrection blew Paul's mind. On the Damascus Road, Paul became convinced that God the Father had raised Jesus from the dead. Amazingly, the God of the Jews raised from the dead a Jew who effectively handed back his Jewish passport by the way he died. Paul became a follower of this crucified Jew who was vindicated by God, and stopped persecuting the church. Ironically, however, Paul's conversion immediately plunged him into conflict with the church in another way, and this conflict directly led to the writing of Galatians. Paul concluded from his encounter with the risen Jesus that Christianity could no longer remain a Jewish affair. 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 – anyone committed to following Jesus' way of love is acceptable to God (5:13-14). The implications are stupendous, because it is not just a matter of circumcision: *all* manners of exclusivity are now out:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (3:28)

This, for Paul, is the heart of the gospel of freedom: 'For freedom Christ has set us free.' (5:1) *This* was the good news that the Galatians accepted from Paul when he first visited them. But Christians back in Jerusalem found this offensive. They sent missionaries out to pressurise Gentile Christians, including the Christians in Galatia, to be circumcised and to keep the ritual food laws. In other words, they told Gentile converts to Christianity that they had to join the Jewish club – exclusivity was back. They were so persuasive that at Antioch, even our patron saint, Peter, succumbed to it – you can read Paul's account of this incident in Chapter 2. The passage read out to us just now was Paul's rebuttal of Peter.

Paul felt passionately concerned that the Galatians might, like Peter in Antioch, be persuaded by those missionaries sent from Jerusalem. His letter to them exudes this passionate concern. You can see this right at the beginning, where Paul dispensed entirely with the usual pleasantries. Where we find a prayer of blessing in all of his other letters, we read this instead:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel ... (1:6)

In place of a blessing, Paul pronounced a curse:

Even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! (1:8)

No mincing of words here. Nor was there any mincing of words in the rest of the letter:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? (3:1)
I wish those who unsettle you [i.e. those who preach circumcision] would castrate themselves! (5:12)

Why? Why was Paul so passionate about this? Because, in the words of the passage we heard earlier, if it is necessary to be circumcised to be Christians, then ‘Christ died for nothing’, and the grace of God is nullified (2:21). In Chapter 5, Paul says it again, but in even more personal terms:

Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. (5:2)

In other words, being exclusive and believing in Christ are wholly incompatible. Christ died to exclude exclusiveness, and God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. That was what Paul realised on the road to Damascus. He stopped persecuting the Church, but started fighting for the Church’s soul. If he had lost this battle, there would have been no gospel, no Christian church. The issue was *that* serious.

Two weeks ago, on Trinity Sunday, we celebrated our 150th anniversary. In his sermon, the Bishop challenged us as a church to listen to God and ask questions as we look forward to the future. As I reflected on Galatians for this sermon and the sermon next week, I got the strong sense that God was challenging us to listen closely to this foundation document of Christian liberty, and allow it to ask us some disturbing questions.

Here is the question for this week. If exclusivity was powerful enough to lure Saint Peter two millennia ago, are we sure that we in today’s St. Peter’s is immune to it? It is a question that we need to ask ourselves individually, and corporately in all our groups and committees, because, as I have tried to show, it is a fundamental issue. Exclusiveness is fundamentally incompatible with being the Church of Christ. ‘But we are not exclusive,’ I hear you say, ‘we welcome all comers.’ But it is easy to delude ourselves on this issue; remember, even Peter succumbed.

How, then, do we make sure that we are honest with ourselves? I suggest it is by putting the question this way: what is that one thing that we simply cannot conceive of St. Peter's *not* doing? What is that one thing that if Fred were to come to me and say, 'We'll stop doing that,' my response would be, 'Over my dead body.' It may be something that is perfectly good and laudable in itself; it may even be something that is divinely sanctioned (circumcision was!). But if it becomes the membership card for the exclusive club of St. Peter's, Newington, then alarm bells should, because such a thing may end up excluding others, and thereby stop us from following Christ's law of love.

Let's therefore take a moment to reflect on that question for ourselves now: what is that one thing that we simply cannot conceive of St. Peter's *not* doing?

It may be that today, God is calling us, individually and as a church, to take some of those things that are most sacred to us, our 'circumcisions', bring them to the cross of Christ, and leave them there, because

We have been crucified with Christ; and it is no long we who live, but it is Christ who lives in us. And the life we now live ... we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us. We do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through [any exclusive practices], then Christ died for nothing. (2:19b-21)

Let us pray.

There's a wideness in God's mercy
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice
Which is more than liberty.

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple
We should take him at his word;
And our lives would be illumined
By the presence of our Lord.

Amen.