

Living in Line with the Gospel Gal 2:11-21

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Children who proclaim their undying love for their pets
and don't feed them.

Teenagers who proclaim their commitment to healthy living
whilst frequenting McDonalds.

Adults who loudly declare

that the government ought to do something about global warming
whilst driving their 4WDs around town.

I'm not convinced by any of the above specimens.

If you believe it,

you've got to live like it's true.

If you don't live like it's true,

then do you really believe it, in practice?

Last week, we saw Peter, James and John
give Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.

"We're brothers in arms.

We agree.

We are proclaiming the same gospel message.

These people who are saying

you need to be circumcised to be a Christian,

they are just wrong."

But then what happened?

Peter came up to Antioch for a visit.

Now Antioch is Gentile territory,

and most of the folk in the church there were Gentiles.

And Peter would share in meals together with Gentile people
without a problem.

They all ate together.

The people from Jewish background in the church,

the people from Gentile background in the church,

and their VIP guest Peter.

Now that shouldn't surprise us.
Peter had after all had a revelation from God in a vision.
Do you remember that story from Acts 10-11?
There was a gentile centurion,
a commander of 100 soldiers.
His name was Cornelius.
He had been faithfully worshipping God in the Old Testament way.
And he had a vision
where an angel told him to send messengers to Peter,
so that he could become a Christian.
So he did.
But would Peter want to go with the messengers?
Would Peter think that it was OK for a Gentile to become a Christian?
Well God sent Peter a vision.
Acts 10:13-16
It was a sheet with all kinds of animals on it,
unclean animals that a Jew could not eat.
and a voice told Peter,
"Get up, Peter.
Kill and eat."
Peter said, "Surely not Lord!
I've never eaten anything impure or unclean."
And the voice said,
"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."
For added emphasis,
the whole thing happened three times,
just so Peter got the message.
And it was a message not just about food,
but about how Gentiles like Cornelius
would be acceptable in God's church.
So with that in his background,
it was not surprising that Peter was happy to visit Antioch
and share a meal with the Christians there,
both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

But here's where the wheels started to fall off.
Some of the Judaisers also came up for a visit.
Remember those folks who were saying
that you needed to be circumcised in order to be saved.
And if you are feeling relaxed and comfortable at this point
because you're a female, don't.
You need to be circumcised to be saved was just shorthand.
What they meant was,
you need to obey the whole Jewish Law.
So what happened next?
Just like we did for Trinity Sunday last week,
they had a church meal.
Those guys probably did it each week.
They probably celebrated the Lord's Supper over a meal.
But the Judaisers set themselves up on a separate Jews only table.
And Peter and even Barnabas went and joined them
on their Jews only table.
And Paul was absolutely incensed.

Is it as bad as all that?
I mean do you have to hang around with everyone
who turns up to a church lunch?
Sometimes there can be some interesting characters
turn up to church lunches,
free food can draw a varied crowd.
But the point is not that they were being antisocial or even snobby.
It's that they were refusing fellowship over a theological issue.
Paul is saying,
"If you refuse fellowship over a theological issue,
then you are saying that issue is of central importance.
Well this issue is of central importance and the Judaisers are wrong.
So joining the Judaisers on this one is failing to live in line with gospel."

So let's clarify a couple of things.
We have today people called Messianic Jews.

Peter and Karin Selig who occasionally visit a service here are some. These are people usually of Jewish ethnic background who have come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

They choose to worship Jesus keeping alive a whole bunch of the Jewish festivals from the Old Testament.

The service that we used for the Passover Dinner here this Easter, I 'borrowed' from some Messianic Jews.

Is there a problem with this way of following Jesus?

No. It's no problem, so long as a couple of things are straight.

1. Following the Jewish festivals is not necessary for Christians.

Doesn't mean you can't do it, just that you don't have to do it.

2. We saved only by faith in Jesus and not on the basis of any observances.

But in my observation, Messianic Jews are happy to be in fellowship with other Christians. And they don't view their salvation as coming by works. So it's all good.

Mostly it's a way of trying to reach out to Jews who haven't yet responded to their messiah and need to in order to find salvation.

So it's fine to be a Messianic Jew.

What's not fine is to divide the church into two groups: the group who have really got it together, and the group we don't want to have much to do with.

And it's particularly not fine to offer some not convincing theological justification for that.

Why not?

Because as Paul says to Peter in verse 14,

"You are a Jew and yet you live like a Gentile not like a Jew."

That is, he was being a hypocrite.

"How is it then that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

That's the real point.

You can say that people are saved only by faith in Jesus all you like.
But if you set up other barriers
about what is necessary to be in the 'in' crowd,
you essentially force people to do extra stuff in order to be accepted.

Well Jewish distinctives are not really a live issue in Hastings.
But the general principal is.

Let me give you two examples,
the first is hopefully not controversial,
the second may ruffle a few feathers, we'll see.

Here is issue number 1.

We must not let denominational backgrounds
be a marker of who is fully accepted at Holy Trinity.

We have people in our church from Anglican backgrounds -
like me for example.

We also have people from Brethren backgrounds, Baptist backgrounds,
Pentecostal backgrounds, Churches of Christ backgrounds, Lutheran
backgrounds, and Roman Catholic backgrounds.

There may be more, but that at least is a healthy sample.

We must never say,
that in order to be one of the 'in' crowd at Holy Trinity,
you have to come from an Anglican background.

Everyone else is welcome to come along,
but only bona fide Anglicans get the important jobs.

That would be a travesty.

That would be like saying,
you are saved by faith in Jesus Christ,
but you are accepted by us by your Anglicanness.

It's effectively forces people
to go against their consciences on some issues
if they want to fit in.

And it raises matters that are just not important in the Bible
to a level that we would use them to distinguish between people.

It's just not on.

I will not allow it.

You are saved by faith in Jesus Christ,
and you are accepted by us on the basis of your faith in Jesus Christ.
That's it.

Hopefully that was not controversial.

But sadly too often in the Anglican Church it doesn't work that way.

OK here's the second one.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Now we have people with different views
of baptism in the Holy Spirit in our church.

We likely also have people with no view
about baptism in the Holy Spirit
or who don't know what I'm talking about.

OK - Let me explain.

In the book of Acts,

some people had an experience separate to their conversion experience
where they are described as being 'baptised in the Holy Spirit'.

Often when they had that experience,

Acts tells us that they spoke in tongues.

Now some people like me believe that it works like this -

On the day of Pentecost,

God poured out his Holy Spirit on the believers.

It was the birthday of the church.

But Jesus said to his disciples, 1:8

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,

and in all Judea and Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth."

So the work of God on the day of Pentecost was not finished.

That was only Jerusalem.

It had to go through Judea, Samaria and then to the ends of the earth.

And as the gospel spread out there were like mini Pentecosts.

It was God's way of giving the stamp of approval
to the spreading church.

Cornelius was the first Gentile to be saved.

And God marked it

so there could be no argument about whether that was his will.

Acts 10:44-46

"While Peter was still speaking these words

(he'd been preaching Jesus to them)

the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter

were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit

had been poured out even on Gentiles.

For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God."

It seems fairly cut and dried to me.

There was a series of mini Pentecosts

as God gave his stamp of approval to the expansion of the church

until it reached the ends of the earth.

It was God's way of convincing Jewish Christians

to accept their Gentile brothers and sisters.

But there is another view.

This is the view held by people who are Pentecostals.

It's not a view held by any of the great church leaders of the past -

not Augustine, not Luther, not Calvin, not Edwards, not Wesley,

because the Pentecostal movement

only came into existence in the 20th century.

But the Pentecostal view is pretty simple to understand.

Baptism in the Spirit happened in the book of Acts to Christians.

We are Christians who share the same heritage.

We should expect a baptism in the Holy Spirit

to be a normal part of the experience of Christian people today.

There are people in our church who hold to this view.

Does it matter that people in the same church

have very different opinions on a matter of theology?

It depends on how crucial the matter is.

In my view, on this issue, it's one to live and let live.

Don't get me wrong.

I think the Pentecostal teaching is in error.

But I'm happy to have people on PC who hold that view.

But here's the caveat.

There is Galatians 2.

What must not be allowed to happen

is that people are made to feel unwelcome or inadequate as Christians because they hold one or another view.

If a group of people decided,

"We're the Spirit filled group"

and we actually think you aren't the full quid as a Christian unless you are spirit filled too.

Or we're going to put pressure on you to become spirit filled too.

Then that is causing division in the church on a secondary issue.

It's the kind of thing Paul told Peter off about.

It's not good enough to say that you are saved by faith in Jesus

but the thing I'm going to get most excited about is baptism in the Spirit.

You must say, you are saved by faith in Jesus

and the thing I'm going to get most excited about is faith in Jesus.

I recognise that will be controversial for some.

But we are not saved by faith in Jesus

and then continue on in the Christian life by some other means.

We are saved by faith in Jesus

and we continue on in the Christian life by faith in Jesus.

Verse 20 of our reading really does spell it out for us.

The cross of Christ is not just the starting point for Paul's Christian life, it's the starting point, the middle point and the end point.

This one would be a really good verse to have as a memory verse.

It would be in my top 10 verses in the Bible to remember.

I've made our children memorise it.

I've made youth groups memorise it.

"I have been crucified with Christ

and I no longer live.

The life I live in the body,

I live by faith in the Son of God,

who loved me and gave himself for me."

That one verse tells us so much about salvation by faith.

Let's mention just a couple of things.

One of the most common objections to salvation by faith is that it gives people a license to do what they want.

The argument goes,

"If you just have to trust Jesus then all your sins get forgiven, then why not go and live however you want?"

You can always get your sins forgiven at the end of the day."

You can hear Paul responding to some of that kind of challenge in verses 17-18 in our reading.

But what does verse 20 tell us?

'I have been crucified with Christ'.

As Stott puts it,

'Once we have been united with Christ in his death, our old life is finished;

it is ridiculous to suggest we could ever go back to it.

Besides we have risen to a new life.

In one sense,

we live this new life through faith in Christ.

In another sense, it is not we who live it at all,

but Christ who lives in us.

And living in us, he gives us new desires for holiness, for God, for heaven.

It is not that we cannot sin again; we can.

But we do not want to.

The whole tenor of our life has changed.

Everything is different now,

because we ourselves are different.

See how daringly personal Paul makes it:

Christ gave himself for me.

Christ lives in me.

No Christian who has grasped these truths

could ever seriously contemplate reverting to their old life.'

Here's another thing this memory verse underlines for us.

Our Christian lives continue as they start
by faith in the Son of God.

'The life I live in the body,
I live by faith in the Son of God.'

We don't start by faith in the Son of God
and then achieve later growth by some other means.

It's faith in the Son of God from start to finish.

Jesus is our life.

It's living by faith in him that determines how we approach each day.

I went to a concert at my kids school this week.

One of the songs that was performed for us
had the gospel according to Whitney Houston in it.

The song was called 'The greatest love of all'.

The claim was that 'learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all'.

I'm not convinced that Whitney's gospel
transformed her life in a good way.

Because the greatest love of all is actually Jesus' love.

You can only understand love properly if you understand Jesus' love.

If you want to be able to love well,

you need to understand the love of self sacrifice
not the love of the self absorbed.

We need to be able to say,

"I no longer live,
but Jesus Christ lives in me."

How does Jesus Christ live in us?

By his crucifixion.

It's through the cross
that we find freedom from trying to earn our salvation.

It's through the cross
that we are able to welcome others
who are very different from ourselves
because at the cross Jesus welcomes us.

That was the heart of where Peter went wrong in today's reading.

He knew how much it cost Jesus to welcome him.

So he should have welcomed the Gentiles in his actions.

Here's a memory verse to live by.

Gal 2:20

"I have been crucified with Christ
and I no longer live.

The life I live in the body,
I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me."