

Galatians 3: 23-29 – *No Baby-sitters!*

Preached on Sunday 23/07/19

8.00 & 11.00 at Christ Church and 9.30 at Good Shepherd

Religious freedom is one of the big issues of today. And religious freedom is a theme of St Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Paul's argument is dense and yet passionate, and also surprising: he perhaps would agree with modern critics that the issue is freedom from religious laws. I'm going to spend our time today trying to unpack the 6 or 7 verses the lectionary has given us. But first I need to take you once more on an imaginative journey to Jerusalem, to help us think harder about what Paul meant by the 'law' from which we are freed.

When I imagine Jerusalem, I picture not only buildings and landscapes, but people – a wonderful diversity of people dressed in all sorts of distinctive ways according to their faith traditions. It is a place awash with religious identity dressing. Those who stand out most are Christian priests, monks and nuns, Orthodox Jewish men and Muslim women but there are others more subtly attired. (Incidentally, I saw very few Muslim women wearing the full niqab or burqa – and one guide told us the ones who do are usually English tourists!) Entering the holy places of different faiths requires concentration to meet the rules: what should be covered or uncovered? Think: head, shoulders, knees and toes!

A Jewish guide explained differences amongst the Orthodox Jews we saw around us in the streets – how different interpretations of the Torah lead to variations in tassels on clothing, hair (cut or uncut), or even design of hat.

He said Judaism is a very contested faith: the old cliché of two rabbis and three opinions holds true. But unlike Christians they don't argue over doctrine. He said the rabbis all agree about beliefs: what they debate is practice – the rules about what you do – and these they argue about endlessly. And people who accept one set of answers form a group, and belonging to that group becomes vital to their identity.

These sorts of rules, I think, are what Paul is referring to in this passage by 'the law'. The range of practices defined in the Old Testament – whether to do with sacrifices, or what you can or can't eat, or what you can and can't do on the Sabbath, and above all about circumcision – were there to define the Jewish people and set them apart from the other nations – how they saw themselves as set aside for God. Paul never says this is wrong or misguided. He has great respect for the people and the law. Nevertheless, he does call the law imprisonment – a kind of protective custody. In fact, the term he uses is akin to 'baby-sitter'. I know there are plenty of experienced baby-sitters here who provide love, care, protection and reassurance for children when the parents aren't there. But to a child growing rapidly towards independence, the baby-sitter is the jailer holding them in captivity – there to be challenged and tested out (can I get away with more? – go to bed later? etc) – until the day comes when that child is trusted on their own. (In case you're wondering, the Greek original in verses 24 to 25 is 'paedagogos' – a trusted slave who supervised a child, escorting them to school and ensuring their safety and that they didn't get distracted on the way. So, baby-sitter is probably our nearest equivalent...)

Anyway, Paul accuses his readers of going back to their baby-sitters. The law is like a paedagogos for the whole people of Israel, given to protect them from falling into moral harm, to guide them in right ways and also to prepare them for adult life. That adult life has now arrived through Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection. Because of Jesus' faithfulness to God, if you put your faith in him and live his way there is no need to worry about detailed stipulations of law. You are free! You don't need the law as a baby-sitter any longer. But some people, having discovered freedom, are going back to old ways. Why? Probably, it's about obeying laws, which confirm identity, which provides belonging.

Today, we know the dangers of obsession with identity, in politics and society as well as religion. People get very defensive about the smallest things, over-react to the slightest criticism – because they feel who they are is under attack. Such defensiveness is surely a sign of immaturity. And then they only associate with the like-minded who belong to their small group – that must be insecurity. They reduce everyone to 'us' or 'them' as they define themselves closely by race, religion, nationality, class, wealth, gender, politics, etc. We must resist, affirming with Paul that there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female – and we could add: no old and young; no Catholic nor Protestant; no British nor 'foreign'; no Brexiteer nor Remainer. That doesn't mean they don't exist; it means we see each person as an individual, and value and enjoy one another as part of the same community.

Paul's answer is not homogenisation – it's much simpler. It's recognising you're all part of one family, and that's God's family. What greater privilege could there be? Whenever a new child is born into our royal family, if the papers are to be believed, we all sit there imagining what it would be like to be brought up 'a royal' – living in those great palaces, with servants at our beck and call... or negatively thinking about being constantly in the public eye. But the thing is, whether you'd like it or not, you would always belong. Whether you lived in the palace or in a cottage, whether or not you wore the right hat for Ascot, you'd still belong to the family. And that's what Paul is saying about freedom from the law. You don't have to prove yourself by meeting anyone else's criteria. You believe, so you belong. Belonging in God's family is what really matters to knowing who you are. You are clothed with Christ, whatever other clothes you may choose to wear – religious garb is strictly optional. Your identity is in Christ. And that brings freedom. There's freedom to enjoy and benefit from customs and traditions old and new: just don't be precious about them. There's freedom to invest in love for God and neighbour: you can do it your own way. There's freedom to flourish as a child of God: you don't have to conform to expectations or be forced into a particular way of being. That is a tremendous freedom to enjoy and celebrate – freedom that stands out as distinctive in a world that seems set on retreating back to its baby-sitters. So walk tall and free as children of God!