

Galatians 2 - 11th Sunday after Trinity - 12 August 2018
Brakpan and Germiston

Dear sisters and brothers,

Paul is angry. At whom? At the Church leadership, more specifically at Peter, the chief apostle. If emails had existed in those days (or WhatsApp for that matter) the correspondence would by now be flying, with large distribution lists and a huge following. Peter and Paul are fighting!

What is it about?

Well, actually it has to do with racism and integration in the Church. Any Sunday Newspaper's delight!

I am not exaggerating. And no, it is not South Africa - this is the first generation Church in Asia minor and Europe that I am speaking about, devout Christians, most of whom had personally met and walked with Jesus, sat at HIS feet, learned from the master himself!

So - why is Paul angry?

As apostle to the gentiles he had to deal with the question: To what extent do non-Jews have to adhere to the Jewish laws? He came to the conclusion that they do not apply, but that salvation is through Christ, to every one who accepts this gift of new life, regardless of race and creed.

The leadership, consisting of the disciples of Jesus, disagreed with him. They only knew the Jewish culture and life style, and to them it was clear that Jesus being saviour, does not invalidate the laws and rituals of their faith.

In order to clarify this issue, Paul travelled to Jerusalem (please remember - this was not a few hours drive on good roads - this meant weeks of walking!!) A meeting was called - the very first synod of the Christian Church - to discuss the matter and rule on it. Acts 15 reports on this, and Paul refers to it in Galatians 2. After much debate, heated words and accusations (yes - this is the first church, yes, these are the disciples of Jesus himself!), after many hours, finally Peter addresses synod, and they come to an agreement: Salvation is not through observing the laws, but through Christ himself! Gentiles are not expected to observe the Jewish

customs when they become Christian, but to follow the teachings of Christ, which are non- negotiable.

So, if the synod in Jerusalem had eventually agreed to Paul's teachings, why is he angry?

It is what happened some years later, that made him explode. Peter and companions were visiting the congregation in Antioch. This was a truly "mixed congregation" of Jews and Gentiles. The Synod decision had been received with joy, and the congregation shared all meals and fellowship not on the basis of Jewish custom, but as brothers and sisters in Christ. When Peter came, he joined in - until ... other disciples of Jesus from Jerusalem came. Although they had (reluctantly) conceded to the synod decision, for themselves they continued to observe the Jewish laws. This included not sharing common meals with non-Jews. And so, when these colleagues arrived, Peter and his companions suddenly withdrew from the casual fellowship with all Christians and associated with their Jewish brothers only. Of course they did still pray and worship together, but during the mingling afterwards, the fellowship on a personal level, they kept themselves separately.

Does that sound familiar? Here in South Africa, in many of our congregations, in the services, we celebrate together - many races and cultures. We share in communion. But when it comes to the outside, starting with the tea and coffee after the service, we prefer to stay with those whom we know. In the old South Africa it was against the law to have fellowship. Now it isn't. But still we prefer not to cross lines, not to leave our own comfort zone of traditions and customs. Here, at church, we are proud of our interaction, of our openness towards others - but when we are amongst our own we do not stand up for the other, we allow prejudice and separation to be expressed, laugh at bad racial jokes, and might even join in expressing the same negative sentiments.

It is a similar situation back then that Paul angrily addressed by writing this text:

Galatians 2: 15 "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles 16 know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one

will be justified.

17 *“But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.*

19 *“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”*

If one ignores the background, one can read this passage as a beautiful reflection on “law and gospel”, a theological discourse. As Lutheran I can proudly state that it also captures the essence our Lutheran teaching that salvation is by Christ alone, by faith alone.

It is, however, when I read the text in it's context, that it starts to become uneasy, because Paul here does not speak about the basis of our faith, but about the consequences that this salvation in Christ has for our every day life!

It is nice to hear it and to reflect on it in a religious space where we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. But it becomes uncomfortable when I hear it while withdrawing myself from fellow Christians that I do not quite like, or that are too different from my race and culture.

It is in reaction to this withdrawing and separation that Paul states: *“For through the law I died to the law (which wants to keep us apart) so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

“Christ lives in me” - what sounds like a wonderful statement of faith actually is a call to repentance, to transformation, to re-thinking my whole life! “I have died to the law” is more than just a theological statement. It is a statement that basically says: Every thing has changed! All my old traditions, prejudices and preferences now have a new yard stick against which they are to be measured: Jesus Christ! His grace does not only affect my life and actions at church, but much more decisively my life and actions at home, at work, in my life *outside* of Church!

Christ lives in me - even Paul himself struggled with this. Even he, the

apostle to the heathen, kept on drifting back to his Jewish roots. He habitually first went to the Jews when entering new cities.

And, whilst just a few verses on in this letter (Gal 3v28) he states that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither Slave nor Free, neither Male nor Female, in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 he falls in to the same trap as Peter does in Antioch. He reverts back to Jewish law and custom and gives the instruction that women should cover their head and not speak in the congregation. How does he justify it? By quoting the laws on this - almost as if the synod in Jerusalem never happened! It is a pity that no-one stood up to him then, by quoting this passage from Galatians!

Dear sisters and brothers, dear all who believe that salvation is through Christ alone: let us be aware of the danger of drifting away from this wonderful grace! Only those of us who are stronger in faith than Paul and Peter might (*might!*) not fall for the temptation to let race, culture and custom be more important than Christ in us. The rest of us, those who are as strong as Peter and Paul, or weaker than them - need to ask regularly ourselves whether we are still on track, whether indeed Christ lives through us? Are we guided by his principles, are we openly and willingly and purposefully interacting with fellow Christians from other races and cultures? Or do we stick to the old patterns and habits of separation?

“Set free by Christ” is more than a wonderful statement - it is also a challenging realisation that I live by different rules and guidelines - those of Christ.

“Christ lives in me” - to I give him free reign, or do I hold him back?

Lord, help me that I allow my prejudices and preferences to be crucified with Christ. Help me to actively allow Christ to live through me!

Amen.

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