

Daily Devotions from the URC

Galatians part 2

3rd – 19th June 2018



Copyright Information

The Psalms (on Sundays) are taken from the Free Church of Scotland's Psalter Sing Psalms. © Psalmody and Praise Committee, Free Church of Scotland, 15 North Bank Street, Edinburgh, EH1 2LS. Other Scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition). © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

If you would prefer to receive these Devotions by email please go to devotions.urc.org.uk and sign up to receive them.

Table of Contents

Sunday 3rd June	Psalm 49.....	3
Monday 4th June	The Martyrs of Uganda	5
Tuesday 5th June	Galatians 3: 19 - 29	7
Wednesday 6th June	Galatians 4: 1-7	8
Thursday 7th June	Galatians 4:8 - 11	10
Friday 8th June	Galatians 4: 12 - 20	11
Saturday 9th June	Galatians 4: 21-.....	12
Sunday 10th June	Psalm 50.....	14
Monday 11th June	Galatians 5:1	17
Tuesday 12th June	Galatians 5: 2 - 6.....	18
Wednesday 13th June	Galatians 5: 7 - 15.....	20
Thursday 14th June	Richard Baxter	21
Friday 15th June	Galatians 5: 6-26.....	23
Saturday 16th June	Galatians 6: 1-6	25
Sunday 17th June	Psalm 51.....	26
Monday 18th June	Galatians 6: 7 - 10.....	28
Tuesday 19th June	Galatians 6: 11 - 18	30

When you are renewed by Christ's spirit - when made into a "new creation" – everything changes. I don't know what that looks like for you. But for me, there's a desperation in knowing that all my hopes, dreams and aspirations rely on a man who hangs bleeding on a cross. There's a humility in knowing that the same man is God's son – raised from the dead – who prays for us right now in Heaven. There's a longing in my spirit for the Holy Spirit of God, and a prayer that His hopes and dreams become reality – "on earth as it is in heaven".

"A new creation is everything" – it's what Jesus lived, taught, died and was reborn for. Renewed, our motivations are brought into alignment with God's life-saving mission.

We've nothing without Christ renewing us.

Prayer

Holy God,
We simply pray as the Psalmist prayed,
"Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and steadfast spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10 NRSV)
For your glory, God.
In Jesus' name we pray
Amen

Tuesday 19th June Galatians 6: 11 - 18

The Rev'd Angela Rigby is Minister of Christ Church URC Tonbridge and St Johns Hill URC Sevenoaks.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Reflection

For us Jesus followers, circumcision isn't as much of an issue now as it was 'back in the day.' Our fleshy showings look different. Is your church the right brand? Stunning worship band playing the 'new sound from heaven' pitch perfect? Serve the best coffee and cakes? Saved souls this week? How many healings? Number of people helped? Inclusive? How many justice campaigns are you fighting for? Give much to charity? How big is your building? How young is your congregation?

In the right spirit – these are valid concerns. In the wrong spirit – these concerns are fleshy shows that weigh us down.

In his BC life, Paul (then Saul) knew all about what it meant to be seen doing the righteous thing. If anyone was qualified to write in big letters about the perils of making "a good showing in the flesh", Paul was. Instead of pointing to himself, Paul points to Jesus Christ crucified - the only one who truly made a righteously good showing in the flesh.

Sunday 3rd June Psalm 49

The Rev'd Ruth Browning is a retired minister in Gloucestershire

1 Listen to me, all you peoples,
all who in the whole world dwell.
2 Low & high, both rich & needy,
hear the message I will tell.

3 I will speak with understanding;
wisdom from the heart I'll preach.

4 I will listen to a proverb;
secrets with the harp I'll teach.

5 Why should I fear days of evil,
when the wicked hem me in—

6 Those who boast of their
possessions?
By their trust in wealth they sin.

7 There is no one who is able
to redeem a soul from death;
None can pay to God the ransom
to prolong another's breath.

8 To redeem a life is costly—
none sufficient price can pay
9 So that one should live immortal,
free for ever from decay.

10 For we all can see life ending;
wise and foolish, all will die.
They must leave their wealth to
others;
none can death's demand defy.

11 So for endless generations
in their tombs they will remain,
Though they owned,
while they were living,
lands to which they gave their
name.

12 Man despite his wealth is mortal;
like the beasts, he fades away.
13 Thus the self-assured will perish,
though renowned for what they
say.

14 Death will feed
upon their bodies;
just like sheep they meet their fate.
In the grave their forms will perish,
far from where they lived in state.

But the upright ones will rule them,
once the morning light has shone.
15 From the grave God
will redeem me;
he will take me for his own.

16 Do not quake before a rich man,
though his fortune grows immense,
And his outward state increases—
17 for he will take nothing hence.

He will soon descend with nothing
of the splendour he possessed,
18 Though in life
he prospered greatly
and they told him he was blessed.

19 He will go to join his fathers—
never see the light of day.
20 Those with wealth
and no discernment
are like beasts that pass away.

Reflection

“There are no pockets in shrouds” was my mother’s tart response whenever anyone referred to the philanthropy of Edward Colston. As a Bristolian, she was speaking in the context of a debate that has rumbled on for a century or more and is now heightened to the point where change becomes fact. The Colston Hall, a large theatre and concert complex, will be renamed in 2020. Edward Colston’s wealth was founded on the slave trade and as the Psalmist points out “...who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches? Truly, no ransom avails for one’s life, there is no price one can give to God for it.”. The writer finds a puzzle, a riddle, in the fact that while slaves can, in certain circumstances, be ransomed yet no one has immunity from death.

As a poem there are 3 parts: an introduction in vv 1-4; reflection that death comes to all in vv 5-12; confidence in divine ransom in vv 13-20. There are points for and against regarding 13 and 20 as a “chorus”, but I found I was automatically humming the tune “Abbot’s Leigh” as I read the metrical psalm. Ideas of rhythm and musicality have differed over 2,000 years.

We read Psalm 49 as Christians - we can’t help but do it - but acknowledge that our understanding of death and resurrection was not that of the Old Testament writers. The psalmist may be hoping for protection from premature death. Yet when we get to verse 15 “... God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” we can’t help but wonder how much insight of a life beyond death this writer had glimpsed. In the final part of the Psalm there is a differentiation between those with religious understanding and the impious rich. Here is not “poor little rich girl” but a positive direction from which to view an increase in wealth “there are no pockets in shroud”.

The apostle knew that all this also applies on our spiritual journey as Christians where we also experience comparable temptations. It is so easy to slip into bad habits and then accept them as normal.

In some ways trying to unpack these words of Paul reduces their impact rather than reinforcing it but my eye fell on verse nine, “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right” and I called to mind Cowper’s line in his hymn at R&S 551, “Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?” Those of us whose faith journey is already quite long may remember our initial exhilaration when faith came alive, and now find that such feelings have grown weak. I write not long after the death of Billy Graham who led so many people to make a commitment to Jesus, but they later found that worldly pressures, and Church life, dulled that initial response so that weariness and worse took over and they lost the sense of blessedness.

The seeds we sow, the habits and practices that we develop may take a long time to show fruit, be it good or bad, but that harvest will come. God is not mocked: but God is also faithful, loving and just. May God give us grace and strength to stand firm and persevere.

A Prayer of Thomas Aquinas

Give us, Lord, a steadfast heart,
which no unworthy affection may drag downwards;
give us an unconquered heart,
which no tribulation can wear out;
give us an upright heart,
which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.
Bestow on us also, Lord God,
understanding to know you,
diligence to seek you,
wisdom to find you,
and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

are all blind, always. Jesus says that our shame must not blind our eyes to the beauty of our own creation, nor make us hide in a corner, consumed by shame. It is sometimes easy to be overwhelmed by our failings and forget that the light of the world shines in the darkest corners. As the blind man affirms “Whereas I was blind, now I can see”.

Prayer

In moments of near despair the doxology calls us back to the beauty of our creation. This is a prayer for the forgiven:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God all creatures here below;
Praise God above, you heavenly Host.
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost....and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Amen

Monday 18th June Galatians 6: 7 - 10

The Rev'd Julian Macro, Retired Minister, member of Verwood URC

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Reflection

Faith, hope, patience – qualities needed by every farmer. In so many areas of life people look for instant results but such are not available, not only when sowing in garden or field but also in human character and behaviour. We receive many warnings about what bad diets and bad habits could do to our health in years to come, but it is so tempting and so easy to put off the evil day and continue to indulge ourselves.

Prayer

Lord, may we be clear in our thanks to those who give generously from perhaps not very deep, but understanding, pockets. Help us to understand that wealth is not evil but we should “Having, First, gained all you can, and, Secondly saved all you can, Then give all you can.” * Amen

*John Wesley Sermon on the use of money

Monday 4th June The Martyrs of Uganda

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is the minister of Barrhead, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs in the Synod of Scotland's Southside Cluster.

Information

Mwanga II, the King of Buganda in 1886, wanted to seduce young men and, when all the Christian pages began to refuse his advances, he had them put to death. They included Catholics and Anglicans. On their way to the place of execution, these young Christians sang hymns in honour of the Lord and some were still singing when the flames surrounded them. Anglicans and Roman Catholics unite on this day to remember those who witnessed in Uganda for Christ, even unto death.

Reading Isaiah 43. 1–7

Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, ‘Give them up,’ and to the south, ‘Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from

the end of the earth — everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.’

Reflection

The tale of the Ugandan martyrs is horrific - the Bugandan king, Mwanga II, gives in to murderous lust and has killed those young men who resisted his lecherous advances. Sadly the horror of Mwanga’s actions haunts Uganda now. Mwanga’s actions, and the young men’s heroic resistance to his lust, fuels murderous homophobia in Uganda. Instead of a gay king persecuting faithful believers now faithful believers persecute LGBT people. The Church urges the Ugandan Parliament to ever more draconian laws and is at the forefront of resistance to other parts of the worldwide Church taking a more tolerant approach. Hagiography has become a tool of repression.

This is a far cry from the words of assurance God gives through the prophet Isaiah; words of peace, rescue, love and assurance. Isaiah’s promise of deliverance is one that gave hope to the martyrs of all ages and gives hope now to those who are persecuted for their faith, politics, ethnicity, gender or how they love.

The God who comforted the Ugandan martyrs continues to give comfort to those who are persecuted in His name now.

Prayer

God of the Covenant,
help your people to love,
even those with whom they disagree,
that the memory of your martyrs,
may inspire us to resist oppression in all its forms,
even when we are the oppressors. Amen.

10 Lord, create a pure heart in me,
and a steadfast mind renew.
11 Do not take your Spirit from me;
cast me not away from you.
12 Give me back the joy I had;
keep my willing spirit glad.

13 Then I’ll teach your ways to
sinners;
rebels will turn back to you.
14 Free me from blood-guilt,
my Saviour,
God most merciful and true.
Then I’ll praise your righteousness;

15 teach my lips your name to bless.
16 Sacrifice does not delight you,
else my tribute I would bring;
Nor do you take any pleasure
in a whole burnt offering.
17 Contrite heart as sacrifice
you, O God, will not despise.

18 Let your blessing rest on Zion;
build Jerus’lem’s walls again.
19 Sacrifices then will please you—
bulls upon your altar slain,
Off’rings made for your delight,
truly righteous in your sight.

Reflection

This penitential Psalm is the source of one of the most terrifying responses in the Book of Common Prayer:

“O God make clean our hearts within us
And take not Thy Holy Spirit from us”

It is a Psalm full of contrition, self-blame, and remorse verging on despair. Its poetic language and rhythm is both seductive and masochistic. We get lost in the language and become deaf to its incoherence. Having dismissed burnt offerings and Temple ritual, it finishes up with exactly that. Having faced up to our sins and iniquities, it blames God for having conceived us this way in the womb. It can make us so full of our sins that we forget the beauty of the creator who has bestowed on us the gift of the Spirit in the first place. It can make us lose balance and forget love. It needs Jesus to restore the balance. “Whose fault is it that this man was born blind?” the disciples ask in John’s Gospel, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” You could be forgiven for thinking that the Psalm says: “Both – we are all conceived in sin.” Jesus says that it is neither. The man’s blindness is something to be put right so that we might all see the love of God. Our guilty hearts interpret the Psalm to say we

What a beautiful picture is being painted here. Can we all find a place on the canvas?

Prayer

Loving Father,
Grant us a place on the canvas,
and face us with the challenge of being like the portrayal.
Grant us the humility of being among the hesitant and nervous;
and the confidence of being among the assertive and confident.
Prop us up as we shoulder our own burdens,
and give us the patience to tolerate those struggling with their own.
Give us the forbearance not to chide those who stray,
and the meekness to accept the guidance of those who seek to rescue us.
Grant us the happiness of the journey and the joyous anticipation of its goal.
Amen.

Sunday 17th June Psalm 51

*The Rev'd Peter Moth is a retired minister and member of St Andrew's URC
Kenton, Newcastle upon Tyne.*

1 O my God, have mercy on me
in your steadfast love, I pray;
In your infinite compassion
my transgressions wipe away.
2 Cleanse me from iniquity;
wash my sin away from me.

3 For I know my own
transgressions;
I can see my sinful plight.
4 You, you only, I've offended,
and done evil in your sight;
So your words are verified,
and your verdict justified.

5 From my birth I have been sinful—
such the nature I received—
Sinful from my first beginning
in my mother's womb conceived.
6 Truth you look for in my heart;
wisdom to me you impart.

7 Cleanse with hyssop, purify me;
I'll be whiter than the snow.
8 Let the bones you crushed be
joyful;
may I joy and gladness know.
9 From my failure hide your face;
blot out all my wickedness.

Tuesday 5th June Galatians 3: 19 - 29

*The Revd' Fleur Houston is a retired URC minister and a member of
Macclesfield and Bollington URC.*

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore 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, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Reflection

From what Paul has said to date, it might seem that he has been undermining the Torah. If neither 'promise' nor 'inheritance' comes from the Torah, what is its purpose? Are those who accuse him of being an enemy of the law right? If not, Paul has to produce some pretty persuasive arguments to the contrary.

So to make his point clear, he uses a metaphor which would have resonated with his Greek hearers. He describes the Torah as a *paidagogos* (disciplinarian). The job of this trusted family servant was to care for a young boy and ensure that he behaved properly. Once his charge reached adulthood, his services

were no longer required. What the Torah does, Paul suggests, is to guide the people of God into the kinds of behaviour that will enable them to maintain freedom once they are set free.

The Galatians would have got the point. The Torah plays an important part in the process of salvation. But it does not in itself give life. That happens through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom God's people find right status with God.

In Christ, believers put on a new identity. Baptism is decisive. And the community of the baptised is marked by radical equality. No longer is there any distinction between Jew and Greek. And all who belong to Christ are children of Abraham and heirs of God's promises of blessing. This gives us pause. Where children, women and men are oppressed in today's Church, are we still 'in Christ'?

Prayer

Gracious God, ruler of our hearts,
you call us to obedience and sustain us in freedom.
Keep us true to the way of your son,
that we may walk in the path of your kingdom.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

Wednesday 6th June Galatians 4: 1-7

*The Rev'd Dr Nicholas Jones is minister of Heswall URC & St. George's URC,
Thornton Hough.*

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Saturday 16th June Galatians 6: 1-6

Ed Strachan, Heald Green URC, Elder and Lay Preacher

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

Reflection

Paul's admonition does not here come out of the blue. It is the implication of the life of the Spirit, as he describes it, in its power and beauty.

That's the setting. Away with all pettiness! All self-serving! All censoriousness! What room is there for self-righteousness in the life in Christ?

We're all on a journey. If someone strays, beckon her/him back gently. Who knows? You or I, we may need a similar service some time. You never know. Our own sense of direction can be a bit rocky from time to time.

Not that that's an excuse for leaning on others when we should be doing the hard work ourselves. Laziness is not one of the fruits of the Spirit. Politicians are keen on giving us stark choices – it's either individualism or the corporate state. Paul is telling us different here. The choice is actually between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. Everything then falls into place.

It doesn't work in today's society? We'd have a better idea if it had been tried more often. It is sad but true that many people will not now darken the door of a church because they have seen how the lives of Christians have been at variance with their profession. How they have experienced censoriousness and unwelcome at the hands of people who should have known better and lived better.

Reflection

This is the easiest of passages and the hardest of passages: it seems so obvious, doesn't it? It's all a bit Ronseal really – it does what it says on the tin! As Paul says, the works of the flesh are pretty obvious and so are the fruit of the Spirit – and we all know which should be on full display in our lives and in the lives of our churches (bearing in mind that Paul writes to churches and not to individuals) Except, are they really?

Paul is no fool – re-read that last sentence again – have we ever really desired someone else's gift? I would love to be able to bake. It must be wonderful to be able to contribute to fetes and fairs, and even to after-church coffee. I have tried, and I watch cooking programmes, but I'm too ashamed of my offerings to contribute them– leave alone compete. I could say the same thing about flower arranging: I'm up to "stick them in a vase and hope" standard – whereas my daughter has real flair.

More seriously, do congregations "mark" preachers? As someone with an itinerant ministry, I've often wondered.... I do know that there can be fierce competition within a preaching team. If that drives up standards of preparation and commitment to a congregation, then done in the right Spirit then that is no bad thing, but it is all too easy for that to become corrupted. I also know that within Worship Groups, there is a serious danger of a similar dynamic developing.

Churches are composed of human beings, and being human, we all fail. It may look simple, but it's not easy.

Prayer

Living Lord,
Help us to truly live by the Spirit
Not only to display the fruits of the Spirit
But grow them in our hearts
That our whole being may glorify you
Alone and together. Amen

Reflection

Do you ever watch the quiz show 'Pointless'? If you do, you'll know that occasionally they have a round based on the names of the chemical elements in the Periodic Table. Sometimes it's clear that the contestants have attempted to learn the more obscure ones in preparation, and come out with answers such as Livermorium or Oganesson (and yes, I had to look those up.)

It used to be thought that these elements are the most fundamental building blocks of the world, and cannot be split up into anything smaller. But ever since Ernest Rutherford proved the existence of the atomic nucleus in 1911 we know now that this isn't true.

Going further back in time, in the ancient world there were considered to be just four elements - earth, air, fire and water - and it was believed these in combination accounted for everything in the universe. This might be what Paul refers to when he writes of 'the elemental spirits of the world'. For Paul, these things enslave us. Only in Christ are we no longer slaves, or children controlled by a guardian. Nothing is more fundamental than our identity as Christians.

Therefore, to be free we must move beyond the idea that the word is divided into fundamental elements or categories. As he has already said, in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female. We need to move beyond dividing people into such categories, or thinking that our cultural constructs are truly fundamental. Being free in Christ means looking past what we sometimes think is fundamental to see there is a new world beyond them, just as beyond the elements there is a mind-boggling sub-atomic world of tiny particles which behave in peculiar and confusing ways.

Prayer

Loving God,
we thank you for the freedom that you give us,
freeing us from the things that divide us from
from you and from each other.
Help us to see that you are

the true 'elemental spirit' of the Universe,
and help us not to value our assumptions about the world
above your all-encompassing love. Amen

Thursday 7th June Galatians 4:8 - 11

Leo Roberts, Children and Youth Development Office, North Western Synod

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

Reflection

I can't remember the last time I got a handwritten letter. Letters from my bank manager, insurance company, Church House...yes, I get them, but they're all typed with maybe even the signature an image. No pen has actually touched paper.

Occasionally (very occasionally) I'll get a 'thank you' card from a church, or maybe from a person, thanking me for something. But a letter? A proper, full letter? Nope, can't remember.

So I'd look forward to getting a full letter. A few words of encouragement, perhaps, or a catch up with what's going on. But I wouldn't want to get this one. Not exactly a 'thank you' note, is it? More of a "You useless worm, I don't know why I even bother" sort of letter.

And what had the Galatians done to deserve this? They'd been human, that's what. Fancy observing special days, months, seasons and years? Pentecost, Advent and any year that ends in a 0... I've done 'em all.

I'm sorry, Paul, if you think I've wasted your time. But, y'know, I'm human.

he meant it, don't despair. As Baxter's hymn *Ye holy angels bright* reminds us, the Church on earth is not alone in facilitating God's purposes.

It is better to fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed than to succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail.

Prayer

Lord Jesus

Who prayed that your people should be one,

Prick us with the pain of division

Remind us of the saints who have lived for a better vision

Refresh our commitment to the unity of the Church on earth

Prepare us for the unity of the Church in heaven.

Amen.

Friday 15th June Galatians 5: 6-26

Dr Lesley Bailey, lay preacher and member of St George's URC, Maghull, Liverpool

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, , gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

Reflection

Richard Baxter had a long and busy life, allowing mini-biographies to be highly selective. He is commemorated today in the Anglican calendar with justifications such as that printed here. However, he is probably the only Englishman in that calendar who also has a United Reformed Church named after him, which is in Kidderminster where many saw him as a Presbyterian champion. His exasperation with the priorities and narrowness of the Church of England meant the second half of his life was a model of what today might be called pioneering ecumenism.

Whatever the ways in which his legacy has been adopted by different churches, Baxter himself was not a party man. That does not mean he favoured woolly compromise: he would not have been put in prison several times if that were the case. He did believe that those who named Jesus as Lord had a fundamental unity as Christians and the institutional Church should not make that hard to see. He worked tirelessly to establish forums where Christians of different traditions could meet to discover that unity. As the Church Secretary of a united URC-CofE congregation, I would gladly have Baxter as our patron saint.

The parable of the sower reminds us that the legacy of our work is unpredictable. Sometimes seeds stay dormant in the ground for a long period before new life appears. It took the Anglican and Nonconformist churches of Kidderminster two centuries before they were ready to unite in raising funds for a statue of Baxter. If you are one of those members of the United Reformed Church who still believe that when Jesus prayed that his people should be one

Prayer

Loving Lord, forgive me when I don't match up to your expectations.
Forgive me when I get bitter about people who seem to be better followers of your Son than I am.
But don't stop loving me. I'm human.

Friday 8th June Galatians 4: 12 - 20

The Rev'd Ruth Dillon is minister at Fleet URC and Beacon Hill Hindhead URC, Wessex Synod

Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Reflection

Paul has finally broken free of the Jewish laws that bound him to his previous life as Saul. He feels free, has become like a Gentile and now acknowledges, encourages and affirms the Galatians.

But there is a cloud of anxiety attached to these verses. He reminds them how they cared for him during his illness, but now he feels they are straying from the truth of the Gospel he shared with them, and urges them to stay strong. He cautions them to watch out for people who say they are friends, but have sinister intentions. Paul cannot understand and is frustrated why they should befriend 'these' people, who hold different views to his own.

When we feel passionate and enthusiastic about issues close to our heart, it can be a painful experience when other people cannot capture that vision we hold. We sometimes get frustrated like Paul, and our voices raise higher.

We must always remember that in our concerns and differences, within a variety of conversations and situations, God is the true mediator, opening our hearts and minds to the movement of the Holy Spirit which points the way the truth in Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Prayer

In the tensions and frustrations,

We pray for patience.

In the heated words and potential arguments.

We pray tolerance.

In the misunderstandings and confusion,

We pray for Wisdom.

Lord, the bearer of truth of Justice

Liberally pour your Holy Spirit upon us,

Till our hearts are overflowing with your grace. Amen

Saturday 9th June Galatians 4: 21-31

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber is Minister of Taunton United Reformed Church

Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

'Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,

burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs;

for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous

Spirit" (as F.F. Bruce named him) was distressed and with the Galatians we too are reminded not to make our rules "the thing" but God's love in Jesus. You are loved; now live it! (As Paul might have said!)

Prayer

God of vigorous life and love, we praise you!

You have set us free along with the Galatian Christians

To live and love strongly in the Way of Jesus of Nazareth.

May passion for the Gospel of your Son, gentleness and determination to stay the course, mark us out in the eyes of all, so that we may bless others with what we ourselves have been blessed with.

Amen

Thursday 14th June Richard Baxter

John Ellis, Immediate Past Moderator of the General Assembly and Secretary of Capel United Church in Kent

Information

Richard Baxter was born at Rowton in Shropshire in 1615. In 1633 he was at the court of King James VI & I but was so disgusted with the low moral standards there that he returned home in order to study divinity. He was ordained but after the promulgation of an infamous Oath in 1640, which required obedience to a string of persons ending in the trite phrase 'et cetera', he rejected belief in episcopacy in its current English form and went as a curate to a poor area of the west Midlands. He opposed the Civil War and played a prominent part in the recall of Charles II, but his continuing dissatisfaction with the way episcopacy was practised led him to decline the See of Hereford. This refusal led him to be debarred from further office in the Church, though he continued to contribute to its life as a prolific hymn writer. He died in the year 1691.

Reading: St Mark 4: 1-9

Jesus began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd

Wednesday 13th June Galatians 5: 7 - 15

The Rev'd Peter Meek, Moderator, URC East Midlands Synod

You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves! For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Reflection

My goodness, there's some loaded and strong language here! Sensitive ears are offended by verse 12 but with such open and bold speech Paul would have been at home in my Lancashire mill town where broad and bold speech is the order of the day. Paul clearly feels very strongly and he does so because he loves. The clue is in verse 14. The language is loaded too. "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough." Does that remind you of anything? These are words quoted from Jesus, which is interesting, since the smart money says that Galatians was written about the early 50s before the final version of Mark's gospel had been written. Jesus was talking about legalism; "the yeast of the Pharisees" and here we have a one time Pharisee now speaking out against the same thing. Paul is desperately saddened that, so early on in their life as a church, they had turned away from the Gospel. They had, seemingly, forgotten that all that is needed to reconcile us to God is the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross which in turn leads to a life of obedience to God fulfilling the Law of Love. Can you imagine, being Paul, freed from legalism, gloriously free, preaching this Gospel only to find some of the Christian communities you've birthed by God's grace falling astray? Those churches had been persuaded by those who teach that God's grace is not what reconciles you to God, but in fact the old understanding of the Law of Moses is necessary too. "The Apostle of the Free

than the children of the one who is married.'

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.' So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

Reflection

Paul is urging his readers to claim the freedom that God is giving them as heirs of God's promises, as the children not of slavery, but of promise. And this passage builds up to the verse, that we shall read tomorrow, that is surely one of the most stunning in the whole of the New Testament. But these verses are not so easy to read as chapter 5 verse 1. After Margaret Atwood's astonishing and chilling book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Paul's argument and the story he recounts may stir in us a sense of anxiety and fear. The story of Sarah and Hagar is one full of sorrow and tragedy, of abuse and threat. While it is true that one woman finds joy in a miraculous pregnancy, another is first pressed into service to provide a child for another and when no longer needed, she and her child are discarded. And the whole form and structure of the story seems to assume that if one person is to be free, another must be enslaved. Paul is writing to a people who, he thinks, are choosing a form of slavery rather than the freedom that God is giving them. 'No' he wants to say, 'God has set you free.'

As someone who enjoys many freedoms, not least among them the freedom of faith, the freedom from sin, the freedom that comes from forgiveness and grace, when I read the story of Hagar I cannot simply identify myself with Sarah. I cannot be free unless Hagar is free too. I cannot be free unless all women (and men) are free. I cannot be free unless slavery, abuse and exploitation are being. If I am truly free, then I am bound, to give myself to finding Hagar and setting her free too.

Prayer

O God of Abraham and Sarah,

O God of Abraham and Hagar,
O God of Ishmael and Isaac,
O God of Paul and the Galatians,
O God who is my creator and redeemer,
give me courage to live the freedom you grant
and grace to call for freedom for all.
Free my brothers and my sisters,
all those who are enslaved by outer or inner chains,
and set me free to be a freedom fighter
in your kingdom. Amen

Sunday 10th June Psalm 50

The Rev'd Ruth Browning, Thornbury URC, Retired Minister

1 The LORD, the Mighty One, is God alone.
He speaks and summons all the earth abroad
From rising of the sun to where it sets.
2 From Zion's perfect beauty shines our God.

3 Our God will not be silent—he will come;
Before him fire will burn and tempest rage.
4 He summons all the earth and heaven above,
That he may judge his folk, his heritage.

5 “Now bring to me my consecrated ones,
Those who by sacrifice are pledged to me.”
6 The heavens will proclaim his righteousness,
For God himself is judge and none but he.

7 “Hear, O my people, listen while I speak;
Against you, Isr'el, I will testify:
You are my people; I am God, your God.
Hear me as I address you from on high.

8 “I will not blame you for your offerings,
The sacrifices which you give to me.
9 I have no need of cattle from your stalls,

Reflection

Ouch! Paul is getting pretty worked up by this point. His own journey from being enslaved by the Mosaic Law (Torah) to breathing the fresh air of the Spirit of Christ, was such a momentous experience that the last thing he wanted was for the fledgling friends of Jesus in Galatia URC to go backwards way. Clearly someone in the congregation was wanting them to revert to life in confinement. Paul says....”No No No. Don't go back to those dark places where observing the intricacies of the Law ruled your actions and words. Keep calm and trust the Spirit of Christ.” Circumcision was the big debating point. But Paul says : “Move on. Insisting on circumcision will “cut you off” from Christ. (This is a “cutting” remark!) But Paul is in full flow. “Choose the Spirit's path. There is only one way to enjoy being a friend of Jesus: ‘faith working through love’.”

Paul believes that faith is “made effective” by love. Paul had made discoveries about the Christian life which we can all embrace even though we may not have shared his dramatic journey slavery to freedom, from Saul to Paul, from Law to Love.. Yes... the greatest of these is Love. Trust it. When it hard to love, trust it. When the world prefers violence, trust it. When pain is all around, trust it. When you have run out of all options, trust it.

Prayer

We thank you God,
for the power of love
which melts bitterness and hatred;
for the patience of love
which outlasts prejudice and dogmatism;
for the courage to love
which transforms impossible situations;
for the freedom to love
which opens doors in decision-making;
for the persona of Love
who is Jesus Christ
source, guide and goal of our journey. Amen.

disease or it might be national liberation movements that defy a foreign, imperialist power.

We are called to 'stand firm'. We have a role to play in securing those gains of liberation as individually, and collectively, by showing the commitment required to maintain freedom as well as to resist sliding back into slavery.

As Paul says in Romans 6: 1-2 "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?"

We know how hard this is to achieve, whether as an individual desperate not to reoffend, or a society which is witnessing unparalleled levels of poverty and social despair and seems to be sliding back into the nineteenth century.

But Christ is on our side throughout. And that is the best news around.

Prayer

Dear God you are a God of liberation and salvation!
Your love is shown in freeing us from sin,
through the utter negation of death.
Help us be resolute and confident in everything we do
And ensure that all humankind is free from every slavery forever. Amen!

Tuesday 12th June Galatians 5: 2 - 6

The Rev'd David Jenkins is a retired minister at Marple, Cheshire.

Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Or of the goats you bring me constantly.

10 "Mine are the cattle on a thousand hills,
The forest animals are all my own.

11 The creatures of the field belong to me;
To me the mountain birds are all well known.

12 "I would not tell you if I needed food,
Because the world and all its wealth are mine.

13 Do I require to drink the blood of goats?
On flesh of bulls do I delight to dine?

14 "But sacrifice thank-offerings to God;
Fulfil the vows you made to the Most High.

15 Call on me in the day when trouble comes;
I'll save you, and my name you'll glorify."

16 But of the wicked God will then demand:
"What right have you to speak about my laws
Or take my covenant upon your lips?
17 You hate my word and spurn it without cause.

18 "You see a thief and then you join with him,
And with adulterers you love to meet.

19 You use your mouth for evil purposes;
Your tongue you harness to promote deceit.

20 "You speak against your brother constantly,
Perversely slandering your mother's son;

21 You thought that I was just the same as you,
Since I kept silent at the things you've done.

"But now I will accuse you to your face,
I will admonish you, as is your due.

22 Consider this, you that forget the Lord,
Lest I destroy and none can rescue you.

23 “The one who brings thank-offerings to me—
He gives me honour and prepares the way
So that I may reveal myself to him
And the salvation of his God display.”

Reflection

This Psalm starts with a description of God, so vast that heaven cannot hold him (v1-6). Then it expresses prophetic exasperation with those who think God can't see them when they hide behind ritual without content (v.7-15). The final section of the psalm (v.16-23), like the cries of the prophets, warns against rebellion masquerading as obedience and states the right way to honour God.

Some commentaries make the point that culture at the time this was written had moved beyond thinking God needed to be actually fed real food or that it is possible to bargain with God. Odd that, when we still hear statements on the lines “so I prayed that if God did this then I would always do that”. Others think the point is to try moving Jewish society beyond the thought that God has such Baal-like needs.

God's, YHWH's, response is “you thought I was one just like yourself” (v.21). Long before the accusations of “you make God in your own image” God has already turned it back on itself by effectively saying “you make yourself and me in the way you'd like to be thought of and seen”.

As Angela Rigby wrote on January 20th: Amos seems to be saying, “Look, mate, how you live day to day should reflect the God you worship. And from the way you lot are living, your god's nowt like the real God!”

The end of the second and third sections of the psalm (vv 14 and 23) say how to honour God by bringing the sacrifice of thanksgiving properly. It was a party - read Lev 7: 11-21 - unleavened cakes with oil and leavened bread and cooked meat and it was all to be eaten, not saving leftovers to eat for the rest of the week. God is generous, so honour that generosity by making yourself like God - be generous in sharing the thanksgiving to all around.

Prayer

Generous God,
May we worship you wholeheartedly,
bring praise sincerely
and share energetically. Amen

Monday 11th June Galatians 5:1

Paul Simon is an Elder at Hadleigh URC in Suffolk

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Reflection

Working in journalism, I always admire a well-crafted headline – especially when it is paired with an arresting first paragraph. You just want to read on and find out more. Today's passage does just that.

Paul warns readers not to return to submission to the Mosaic Law and the various beliefs and practices they'd bolted onto it.

For contemporary Christians, these words may relate to any number of issues – but they all boil down to the fundamentally right relationship between God and humanity. Whilst such freedom is an act of grace, unearned by us – we are called upon to do something.

Because of God's love of freedom from sin, S/He has liberated us from all that had us in its thrall. Christ's death and resurrection has sealed that deal.

At an individual level, it might have been an addiction, an unpleasant personality trait that upset others or something which resulted in direct and serious harm.

At a corporate level, it might be the conquering of what William Beveridge called the five "giant evils" in society: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and