

Proper 9C 2019 SSP

Galatians 6:1-6, 7-16 INTEGRITY: A GIFT FROM JESUS

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Church Lectionary has appointed Saint Paul's great Epistle to the Galatians for the past several weeks. Today, we read near the conclusion, when Paul famously exclaims: "Far be it for me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

Before we go further into this, let's remind ourselves who Saint Paul was (is), who were the Galatians, and what was the context of Paul's correspondence with them?

Paul was the premier missionary apostle of the early church who took the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, beyond the boundaries of first century Palestinian Judaism to the world of the non-Jewish nations, the Gentiles, some of whom were quite heathenish in their practices. Paul, who was formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, had been a strict orthodox Jew, known as a Pharisee, a zealous, brilliant intellectual and a persecutor of the early church. But on one of his persecution errands, the Risen Lord Jesus appeared to him, spoke to him, and turned him around into what one great scholar has called "the Apostle of the heart set free." Meaning, when he gave his heart over to Christ, Paul underwent a spiritual emancipation he was impelled to share with as many fellow human beings as possible. One of several ironies here reveals God's sense of humor: the strict legalist Pharisee becomes the messenger of freedom in Christ to all, including the very unwashed. In a word, the former Pharisee founds the one holy catholic apostolic church of the creeds, once aptly described as, "Here comes everybody."

Now for the Galatians. Galatia had been a kingdom of Celts (!) who had migrated to central Asia Minor [Turkey] from Gaul [France] a few centuries before Christ; and then under

Roman conquest Galatia became a large province of the Empire under Caesar. They were related therefore to the Scots, the Welsh, the Irish, the Bretons in France, and the Galicians in Spain. I don't know if they wore kilts or played bagpipes. But that was not the issue Paul was addressing. Paul was very upset with the Galatians, to whom on his first missionary journey he had introduced the Good News of Jesus as Messiah of the Jews and also Lord of the Gentiles; upset that they were trading away their Gospel freedom for legal/ethical bondage. What Paul does in his letter is clarify the difference between Christian righteousness, or integrity, and all other kinds.

Righteousness, or integrity, is normally thought of as self-worth: I consider myself, and wish to be considered, a good person, because I mean well and try to do good, I amend my faults and strive to do better. I work hard. I do unto others as I would have them do unto me, willing and trying to do the good for them. This is standard universal ethics, righteousness in the sense of right relations accomplished inwardly, inter-personally and socially.

But Christian righteousness is of another order. It stems from the faith that only God's Son has a perfect relationship with our Maker, so much so that Jesus called him Abba, Father; so much so that he is really the One, True, Fully and Perfectly Human Being. He is free from the dehumanizing effects of sin. Therefore Christian righteousness is not a goodness that we earn, but rather that we receive as a gift flowing from Jesus Christ the Son of God through the gift of our faith in the Lord. Christian righteousness is a gift flowing through a gift! There is not a thing about it to boast about.

Many years ago a man at my church door was very angry after the service. He said to me and my rector who had been the preacher that day, "I'm sick and tired of hearing you guys talk about salvation. I've lived a pretty good life. I don't need to be saved." There you have it: the

difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds. It's the difference between union with God through Christ versus a pretty good life (or not so good life, depending on who's judging).

This difference is precisely what Paul was stressing to the Galatians. They were falling back on ethical, legal self-worthiness, leaving behind the Gospel of freedom and integrity in Christ. They were re-entering the world of moral and religious credentials, the world that crucified Jesus.

The Lord, in his perfect filial relationship within God, in his full and perfect humanity free from sin, inevitably collided with the powers of this fallen world. God knew perfectly well from all eternity the price he would pay for creating free agents and redeeming us. When I was a boy I was shocked by a graphic portrayal of the crucifixion in a movie. "How could they do that to him?" I cried to my father, "All he did was good!" Years later in college, I came to see, one night while studying for a quiz on the Gospel, that the crucifixion was not only Jesus's life's work and mission, but that three o'clock on Good Friday was his great victory: "It is finished." That vivid movie portrayal of the crucifixion resurfaced as wondrous good news. I also saw that Jesus lives, and that he reaches out from that cross towards every one of us. This is what the Apostle means when he says that he glories in nothing but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified to him and he to the world.

And this is just what we are saying here today, when we offer once again the Holy Sacrifice and take part in Holy Communion. We stand on Christ's righteousness, on Jesus's integrity; and we receive it as our life, his Body and Blood, unto life eternal.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.