

Sermon - Righteousness from our faith relationship

Based on Philippians 3.1b-4.1, and John 17.1-5 (NRSV)

Chapter 3 was a third actual letter

- Over the last two Sundays we looked at chapters 1 and 2 of the Bible document we call Paul's letter to the Philippians.
- Researchers suggest those chapters were part a second actual letter that he wrote.
- Today's text starts with the second sentence of chapter 3 and includes the first verse of chapter 4.
- Scholars think that this text might be from a third actual letter, but regardless of whether it is or isn't, the focus does connect with what has come before.
- And this is why Paul says at the beginning of this text :

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. (Ph 3.1b)

- If Paul was happy to repeat some of his points in successive letters to the church in Philippi, then no wonder that when the elders made copies to share with other churches, they composed one document out of several.

Congregations of Greek-speaking Jews

- Nevertheless, in the text for chapter 3 Paul makes a pointed argument against a group or some groups that were part of the church community.
- And so the focus of today's sermon is to unpack that argument.
- It is helpful to have some idea of the religious context of a lot of these early church communities.
- Whereas today the vast majority of churches have no Jews in their congregations, in the first few decades after Jesus' resurrection Jews initially made up the majority of the congregations.
- This should be obvious: Jesus and the first named disciples were all Jews, Paul and Stephen were Jews, and the starting point for missionary endeavours in many towns was the local Jewish synagogue.
- Jewish communities had become well-established all around the Mediterranean, and while they looked to the temple in Jerusalem as the physical epicentre of their religion, they looked to the local synagogue as the resource for their daily faith.
- Not only had Jewish communities settled far away from Judea, but they had also shifted culturally in many ways: they were Jews, but they were Hellenised Jews, in that they spoke Greek and read the Jewish scriptures in Greek.

The Jewish foundation of the Philippian church

- Two weeks ago I quoted the passage from Acts where Paul and his missionary companions first arrived in Philippi:

On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.

The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. (Acts 16.13-14)

- So here we have a description of someone who is 'a worshipper of God' - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Jesus, and Paul - at a place of prayer on a Jewish Sabbath day.
- Essentially Lydia was a Jew listening to Paul, another Jew.

Different factions

- So in these missional cities there were Jews, some of whom would have been very devout, and others would have turned up only for the major festivals - it's like that for most religions in the world.

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- Of the more devout ones, there would have been those who were quite happy to keep going with what they were taught in their youth and wanted nothing more, while others - like Lydia - were open to fresh teaching, usually brought in by a follower of a renowned rabbi - as Paul was.
- The fresh teaching might have been a call to return to socially and religiously conservative ideals, or might have been some new insights such as those that Paul brought, about the idea that the awaited for Messiah had actually already come, taught a radically fresh understanding of the scriptures, and then moved on.

Converts: Jews and Gentiles

- So when we think of the early Church in Philippi, there was not the kind of distinction and separation between Gentiles who accepted Paul's teaching about Jesus and Jews who didn't, that we have today.
- It was more a case of Jews who followed Christ's teaching and Jews who didn't.
- Of course Paul wasn't only interested in sharing the Good News with Jews - he spoke to Gentiles as well, and when they converted and were baptised, they were baptised into the radical Judaism of Jesus.
- The well-known argument between the more conservative Jews and the more radically-minded Jews was whether these Gentile converts then needed to be physically circumcised or not.
- And this is the starting point of Paul's argument in chapter 3.

The righteousness of the law

- He's very derogatory about these conservative Jews in the church community of Philippi, and he refers to them in their fixation on circumcision as *'those who mutilate the flesh!'* (Ph 3.2)
- He continues: *'it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.'* (Ph 3.3)
- He then counters any argument of entitlement that they might make against his words.
- He's expecting them to say things like: 'Who do you think you are, coming and telling us Jews about our own faith?' - because he's encountered this line of thinking many times before.
- He challenges them by stating, in effect: 'Do you think I'm not qualified to say what I'm saying? Well then, here's my pedigree ...' - which he then lists in terms of being the most Jewish of Jews, and indeed such a zealous Jew that he was known for persecuting the first followers of Jesus.
- He states, in effect: 'If you think your opinion as a righteous Jew carries more weight over mine as a righteous Jew, then let me be very clear, that I am far more righteous in terms of the Jewish law of the Torah than you are.'

It's worthless compared to knowing Christ

- And he then continues with his fundamental point:
- 'But!' Paul effectively states - 'But ...!'
- 'But all my entitlement due to my righteousness in terms of the law is actually worthless - it's rubbish - it counts for nothing.'
- 'Indeed, not only my self-made righteousness, but also everything else that I used to think I had been successful in achieving, I now regard as a loss, compared to *knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*' (Ph 3.8)
- At this point I will remind you what Jesus said, as found in the Gospel passage:
And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17.3)

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Regulations or relationship

- Paul continues:

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. (Ph 3.8-9)

- Here Paul states the two basic concepts that people of the Jewish faith struggled with for centuries before Jesus, and that people of the Christian faith have struggled with for centuries since then.
- And these are:
 1. do we achieve righteousness and eternal life and the kingdom of heaven by following regulations,
 2. or do we achieve all of this by being in relationship?
- Are we righteous by being morally upright law-abiding citizens, or are we right-wise with God by being in relationship with our heavenly Father, through his son Jesus?
- Regulations, or relationship?

Being in faith relationship is eternal life

- Jesus was clear: eternal life is about knowing - not knowing about, but being in relationship with God, through his Son.
- Paul is clear:

'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' (Ph 3.10-11)
- And Paul spells this out further:

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Ph 3.13)
- For Paul it is all about relationship.
- And this is where he comes from in his argument with the Jews who want the Gentile converts to undergo circumcision.
- Paul is effectively saying to them: 'You want them to attain righteousness by complying with regulations? That's useless. They have already been made righteous by being in relationship with God, in Christ.'

Regulations reduce harm: relationships enable life

- Let me make a simple comparison with our current Covid regulations.
- Regulations like these can be helpful - helping to slow down and stop infections, and reduce the deaths that result.
- These regulations, like many other good regulations such as traffic regulations, reduce harm, reduce damage, reduce death.
- But they don't promote life.
- Regulations are negative - they are preventative.
- But for life, we need relationship.
- Physical new life is dependent on relationship - between flowers and insects, and between creature couples.
- Spiritual new life is dependent on relationship - between each other, and between ourselves and God.

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Stand firm in [relationship with] the Lord

- I am going to conclude by quoting some of Paul's words as he ends this argument - and it is helpful to hear Paul saying these words to us as well.
- Paul urges the readers of his letter:

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind (Ph 3.15)

Sisters and brothers, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. (Ph 3.17)

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. (Ph 4.1)