

## Imprisonment, Inheritance, Unity, Freedom

What a picture we have in our Galatians reading this morning. The law was like a guard, imprisoning the people of God. It provided direction, and restraint, kind of like a tutor, schoolteacher, or custodian. A school teacher can make a child behave, and can govern and constrain the behaviour of a child for a short time. But a teacher or guard cannot make the heart of a child good.

That's how the law was for the people of Israel. It gave direction and restraint, and it prescribed the way someone mature should behave. But it could not give Israel a new heart, nor an inheritance from the Lord. Without the maturity of faith, the law did not benefit Israel. The law functioned then to expose the sin of Israel, and also to constrain them until God changed their hearts. Although it instructed the youthful nation of Israel how to live by faith according to the mercy and promises of God, Israel rebelled, turned away and lacked mature humility. Our reading from first Kings tells the story of God's people turning their back on the Lord. They are walking away from the wonderful gift of knowing God's love. Even in their sin, God desires their repentance and return.

The law works this way for us too. If we don't have hearts that trust in God, and rely on the mercy of God, the law of God will feel like a burden, offensive, tiresome and useless task given by an unforgiving school teacher. But if we do have hearts that rely on the mercy of God, then we see the law as intended; what we need and desire, a good and wholesome prescription from the Great Physician. Our attitude to the law depends on our attitude to the law-giver. What is your perspective on God's law? What does that reveal about your attitude towards God, the giver of the law?

“Faith has come,” announces Paul. Its coming is connected with the coming of Christ. By God’s grace, this era of redemptive history since Christ’s coming has brought great numbers of people to respond to God in faith. Faith has come. The Christian church is marked by this above all else. We trust, like children, in the mercy of God. When the law was preached, people did not respond with the same kind of faith. But the Gospel? In two thousand years of Christian history, the Gospel has changed the world. It has spread because many who hear it respond with this kind of faith because their hearts are opened by the Holy Spirit. Faith has come. God is fulfilling his promise to give new hearts to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith has come to every one of us who lives by faith in the Son of God. Faith was the only thing that could bring us out of imprisonment.

The answer to our Psalmist’s question, “When will I come and see the face of God?” is “now.” Christ has come. Faith has come. Whoever has seen Christ sees the Father. May the Lord increase our “hunger and thirst” to see the face of God.

Faith in Christ unites us so closely with Christ that all he has becomes ours. When we entrust ourselves to Christ, and we say we want a seat at his table, Christ will never turn you away. He forgives our sins and brings us into belonging with him. At the table of the Lord, guests become family members. Race, social status, and gender do not privilege nor diminish anyone’s place at the table. Not even the man from our reading in Luke, who had demons, was too far off for Christ’s healing hand. Nothing we could do won our adoption into God’s family. Every possible reason for boasting is removed. We are all dependant on the

invitation of Christ, not the value of our differences. There is nothing more secure, in this life or the next, than the invitation of Christ.

We are no longer in the custody of the law. We are no longer imprisoned by it, nor are we under its guardianship. We are no longer oppressed by a demand we cannot fulfill. We no longer relate to this way. We are led by the Spirit; we are not under the law. We need not be burdened or oppressed by it. We do not rely on it for relationship with God. We have instead all the assurance we need because of the invitation to Christ's table.

After the demon is cast out, the people tell Jesus to go away because when you raise the dead from the tombs, when you put the demon possessed person back in his right mind, fear has a way of creeping in. Jesus and his disciple pack into the boat and prepare to leave. But the former demoniac begs and pleads to go with Jesus. He wants to be a disciple of this Most High God, to know better this Jesus who recognizes him, even when his own people cannot see who Jesus is. But Jesus wants him to remain, to tell the story of his healing, to spread the good news among the people who only knew him as the man who ran naked in the tombs. He is a living parable of the power of God to transform even the most broken and neglected into beacons of hope. Hope can be frightening and unfamiliar.

So, he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Today, so can we. We can proclaim throughout our lives how much Jesus has done for us. We are no longer imprisoned under the law. We have received the inheritance by faith through the Holy Spirit. We are adopted and are in unity with one another. We belong to Christ.

As we proclaim this to others, we must also proclaim it to ourselves. In the words of the psalmist, “Why are you so full of heaviness my soul: and why so unquiet with in me? O put your trust in God, for I will praise him yet who is my deliverer and my God.” The psalmist fights to believe the promises of God.

Say these things to yourself as you go from this place. Preach these things to yourself at home, at work, at the shops and around the neighbourhood. Proclaim these things to your own soul morning and night.

“In Christ Jesus you are [a child] of God.”

“The Lord is about to pass by.”

“You are God, my refuge.”

“God, my joy and my delight.”

Look “... how much God has done for you.”