

FREEDOM – REV'D JOHN GOLDSWORTHY – SUNDAY 27 JUNE 2010

School holidays began two days ago. Tens of thousands of children said, in one way or another, "We're free". Thousands of teachers said the same thing, I am sure. Single parents faced more pressures as did some grand parents. I was educated at a private Presbyterian School in Sydney where we had assembly every morning and sang from the school hymn book. But nothing could match the gusto with which we sang, on the last day of term, the school version of "Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing".

No matter how nostalgic our memories of school days, would any of us want to go back now and repeat the experience? There was something special about being freed from school discipline and regimented learning. Yet, without that form of education in our formative years, we would have been hard pressed to make the most of adult life. Our teachers, by rights, brought us to a point where we were free to make our own decisions in choosing a career and, hopefully, had become sensibly self-disciplined.

So it is difficult to imagine that a group of self-styled educationalists could unsettle us and have us believing that success in adult life requires that we add to our chosen career a return to school and its rules designed for children. That, you would agree, would be a backward step. Which brings me to today's reading from Paul's letter to the Christian community in Galatia. (Ch 5 verses 1, 13-25)

Paul is confronted by a push for a backward step in the Galatian church. If he had lived in our day, I suspect he would be a CFA volunteer. He had to spend a lot of time and energy putting out fires, metaphorically speaking, in the different churches. The benefit of that for us is that much of Paul's writings, preserved for us in the New Testament, have pastoral content generated by disturbances in the fledgling churches. He has trouble in the Galatian church and he even uses the teacher – child relationship to confront this "fire".

The "fire" in the Galatian church was lit by people we call Judaisers – Jews who were attracted to Christianity but insisted that obedience to the Mosaic law was still binding. Food restrictions and the practice of circumcision were still necessary for Christians. Paul will have none of it. The Jewish law was like a guardian or school teacher designed to lead us to Christ. Let me quote Gal. 3:24, "The law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified (put right with God) by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons and daughters of God through faith."

2.

Law has two basic functions: one is to provide rules to live by to prevent anarchy and chaos and to uphold justice; the second is to establish guilt when the law has been broken. Law cannot undo what has been done. As Paul expressed it a few verses earlier, "If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law."

Christianity is not about encouraging lawlessness. What it is about is insisting that human beings are incapable of living such perfectly righteous lives that we can qualify ourselves for a place in God's heaven. The only standard of righteousness that can qualify us for eternal life is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The gospel (the good news) is that the perfect righteousness of Christ is credited to us through faith. As we put our faith in the promises of God as they are centred in the person of Christ, in his atoning self-sacrifice and in his victorious resurrection, then God accounts us as righteous in his sight.

The Judaisers wanted to enforce obedience to the Mosaic law on the new and vulnerable Galatian Christians. This was not just the permanently valid moral law of the 10 commandments, but also the ceremonial and religious law including circumcision and food and other restrictions. In countering this, Paul takes them back four and half centuries before Moses to an event in the life of the great patriarch, Abraham. You can read all about it in Genesis chapter 15.

God had promised Abraham that he would have a naturally born child by his wife Sarah, and that through this offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed. In Genesis 15 we find a desperate Abram decades later, confronting God about the failure of this promise to be honoured. He is nearing 100 and his wife about 90. He is telling God that it is all too late. In response, God invites him to look up into the crystal clear night sky and count all the stars if he is able. Then says God, "So shall your descendants be – beyond numbering". Now follows an indispensable element of the gospel. The text continues, "And he, (that's Abraham) believed the LORD and he (the LORD) counted it to him as righteousness". Some translations read "credited it to him as righteousness." It means the same thing. This statement about righteousness being credited to Abraham is so important to our understanding of the gospel that Paul devotes the whole of Romans chapter four to explaining its significance.

Let's try to be clear about what has happened here. Abraham has believed in God all his long life and has followed the call of God wherever that led him. But the Biblical record is very honest and reveals the flaws in Abraham's character as well as his strengths. He was not perfect and so would never fit into a perfect environment, what we call heaven. As he now looks at the myriad stars in the sky he makes a crucial leap forward. He moves from believing in the existence of God to believing a very specific and seemingly impossible promise of God. It was on the basis of this trust in God's promise that God credits this flawed servant of his with righteousness.

3.

What we learn in the New Testament is that the righteousness with which Abraham and every believer is credited, both before Christ and after Christ, is nothing less than the righteousness of Jesus, the sinless Son of God. As Paul puts it in another place, "He, Jesus, who knew no sin, was made to be sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Put in the metaphor of monetary terms, Jesus, who was actually sinless, had the world's sin debited against his account. On the cross he paid the debt in full so that now the way was open for his perfect righteousness to be credited to our account, although we are actually sinful. This is what Jesus meant when he said that he had come to give his life as a ransom for many.

The word ransom means to buy back someone's freedom. And so our second reading, from Galatians 5, begins, "for freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm then and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery". The slavery to which Paul refers is the futile attempt to win God's favour by our own efforts and keeping religious rules and regulations. Freedom is both God's gift and our divine calling, Paul continues, so do not abuse it by using it as an opportunity for the flesh, rather, through love serve one another. This statement plunges us into some of Paul's technical language. He does not use flesh just in a physiological sense. Flesh stands for every aspect of our total being that stands against full obedience to God. Flesh, for Paul, is every instinct within us to do our own thing, to be independent of God. In our Gospel for today we had a flesh versus spirit conflict; people offering to follow Jesus but putting conditions on how or when. Jesus rejected this because no-one puts conditions on the sovereign God. Flesh, by definition, stands against the Holy Spirit who desires to lead us in the will of God and to empower us for the loving service of God. Service for God often finds its most visible expression in our loving service to one another.

For freedom Christ has set us free. This includes freedom to resist the desire to be independent of God and freedom to heed the leading of the Holy Spirit. Flesh and Spirit are opposed to each other, Paul tells us. The works of the flesh are evident, he says, including such things as sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, drunkenness, orgies and such like. These have no place in the kingdom of heaven.

By contrast the freedom for which Christ has set us free includes the freedom to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. Soon we will break bread and pour out wine to remember with what cost our freedom was purchased. So let us look up with Abraham into the clear night sky and with renewed joy grasp the gracious promises of our God.