

The Next Great Reformation?



Feast of Francis

1 October 2017

Ian Lothian

Galatians 6:14-18

Matthew 11:25-30

The Scots are revolting – again. This week, passing away some of the unusually quiet time post-election, but pre-Winston, I was scanning through the Guardian on-line newspaper, checking out what else had gone wrong with Brexit this week. The Tweet of the week, from Guardian writer Nick Cohen was:

“I think the only truly British way to deal with Brexit is to pretend we never voted for it”

However, I noticed another headline which really grabbed my attention - “Scottish Anglican Church faces sanctions over vote to allow same sex marriage.” Apparently, Scottish Anglicans voted overwhelmingly in June in favour of allowing same-sex couples to marry in Church. The Anglican Church in Canada is expected to follow suit.

The Scottish Church is expected to face sanctions imposed by global Church leaders next week. However, three of the 39 primates have declared they will boycott next week’s meeting in a sign of continuing discord over the same-sex relationships, with one warning of the “next great Reformation” or schism within Christianity.

An accompanying photo of Archbishop Justin Welby face to face with four Gay protestors showed clearly the pain and difficulty of this issue. My mind keep returning to this as I thought about this morning’s Epistle reading – Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “*For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!*” (with an exclamation mark!)

I know it’s not an exact parallel, but I wonder what Paul would have made of the so-called “next great Reformation” in the Anglican Church.

Galatians is an interesting Epistle for a whole range of reasons. First, it is one of the earliest writings in the New Testament – possibly the second, after First letter to the Thessalonians.

Marcus Borg’s view is that no other relatively short New Testament document has had as much influence on Christian theology as Galatians.

Its language and ideas were central to Martin Luther's thought and have been ever since.

It is also, by some way, Paul's grumpiest piece of writing. The renowned Catholic biblical Scholar Raymond Brown considers it the most Pauline of Paul's writings – "the one in which anger has caused Paul to say what he really thinks."

Certainly it is the only one of his letters that does not include a thanksgiving after the greeting and blessing at the beginning. He accuses the Galatian communities of "deserting" and "turning to a different gospel. He pronounces a double-curse on anyone who advocates a gospel other than the one received from him. He calls the "foolish" and bewitched", and wishes bodily harm to those who have been troubling them.

So, what was the issue which was so upsetting to Paul? Those in the Christ-communities in Galatia were primarily Gentiles, who had been attracted to Judaism. The central question is whether Gentile converts to life in Christ need to be circumcised. And did they need to follow at least some other Jewish laws, including food laws? While with them, Paul had taught "no." He had offered full participation in the Christ movement without circumcision and observance of Jewish laws.

However, some years earlier, other teachers, - Paul's opponents in Galatia – had told them "yes." Gentile males had to be circumcised and follow Jewish food laws. For them, it seemed obvious that what Jesus began was a movement within Judaism, and that for Gentiles to become children of Abraham, they had to enter into God's covenant with Abraham, which included circumcision.

It is important note: these other teachers were followers of Jesus. They were "Christians". Paul's converts in Galatia were not being tempted by non-Christian Jewish teachers. Rather, this was a conflict within early Christianity.

A conflict, yes. But Paul's words were "*neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!*" So, according to Paul, everyone is missing the point – the point being, the new creation. Paul doesn't expand at this point as to what he mean by "the new creation", but earlier in his letter, at the start of Chapter 5, he says "*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*"

We met the “yoke” again in our Gospel lesson today, when Jesus said: *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

“Yoke” refers literally to the wooden frame placed over the necks of two oxen drawing a cart or plough. It was traditional to speak metaphorically of the “yoke of the Torah”. A guiding force, but at the same time potentially a burden – referring to the religious authorities who through the rigorous interpretation of the Torah in accordance with their tradition impose heavy burdens on people – the ordinary people – the unlettered people.

The “rest” Jesus promises to the burdened is not simply respite in a general kind of way. The Greek word *anapausis* conjures up the refreshing break that travellers across a desert find in some oasis along the way. In the biblical tradition God’s “resting” on the seventh day following the work of creation and the idea of the Sabbath as a day for rest and union with God led to descriptions of the messianic age, the future period of time on earth in which the messiah will reign. The Kingdom of God, as a time of “rest”.

So the rest promised by Jesus is not that of idleness and absence of activity, but that of arrival at the fullness of life in the kingdom, the enjoyment of an eternal Sabbath with God.

So, there we have it...

Paul side-stepping traditional rules for Freedom in Christ; the burdensome yoke of slavery set aside; Jesus inviting us into relationship with him, his gentleness and humbleness of heart, as the one who can safely lead burdened humanity to “rest” in this final sense.

This Francis tide, we can hardly leave the invitation of Jesus locked up in the rival interpretations of the Synagogue scribal tradition. To quote Brendan Byrne, in his book on Matthew’s gospel “Lifting the Burden”, “We are painfully aware of instances in which life in the Church has become ‘weary and burdensome’ for many, when instead of lifting the burdens that are part of all human lives, religious allegiance and practice have actually increased them – which is why, in today’s climate of freedom, so many have cast them off, and with them the belief and belonging that seems to impose them.” (p.97)

For those of us who look to Francis and Clare for inspiration and guide us along the way, it is a bit of a litmus test to imagine what Francis would make of such conflicts of interpretation within the Church today, and the burdens still being placed on us all.

I don't believe it is too hard to imagine. Francis was the sort of man who would take off the shirt from his back, and everything else he wore, and return it to his father to demonstrate a complete break from his background and upbringing so as to free himself to follow Christ completely.

His commitment to the poor was absolute – to the extent that Pope Francis has not only taken his name, but has also clearly expressed his desire for a “poor Church – a Church for the poor.”

The Rule of Francis was developed completely with the poor, itinerant and vulnerable in mind. The Franciscan Brothers had also to make themselves poor and vulnerable, so that they could wholly identify with and understand those whom they would seek to help.

While expressing a kinship with all of Creation, Francis gave everything, that he might accept the invitation of Jesus, and receive God's “rest” as expressed in today's Gospel reading.

In finishing, I'd like to share with you one of the daily prayers from the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis – a prayer from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. A prayer which sets out a vision of the Kingdom of God for us all today; a world where indeed we could all find rest.

*Grant us Lord, a vision of your world
As your love would have it;
A world where the weak are protected.
And none go hungry or poor;
A world where the riches of creation are shared;
And everyone can enjoy them;
A world where different races and cultures
Live in harmony and mutual respect;
A world where peace is built with justice
And justice is guided by love.
Give us the inspiration and courage to build it,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord
AMEN*

References:

Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word*

Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*

Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*