

***Galatians Sermon 3***  
(Galatians 3:23-29)

In this day and age the phrase ‘justification by faith’ seems to come to us from a bygone era. The concerns of that era no longer seem as urgent and vital as they were to the people of that time. The issue, remember, was about what made people acceptable and worthwhile in the eyes of God. The alternatives, we were told, was whether good works made us acceptable to God, or whether we became acceptable by having faith in God. The Roman Catholics, it was suggested, relied on good works. Protestants, who rather arrogantly claimed to understand the Bible and particularly St Paul aright, believed that it was their faith that made them right with God. Thus we were told that the really important point that Paul was making was that it was deciding to believe in Christ rather than deciding to rely on good works that put us right with God.

As I have suggested we find it strange that people were very passionate about this matter. There are probably many reasons why the desire to be put right with God does not rack present-day society with anxiety. However the fact that the issue does not stir contemporary passions provides the church, I think, with a fortuitous opportunity. The opportunity is to read, free from previous controversies, what St Paul had to say to the Christian communities in the Roman province of Galatia. This is, of course, what every age has to do. So let us read what Paul does say.

I’ll begin by pointing out that Paul uses these phrases - “before faith came”, and, “now that faith has come.” He says that “before faith came” there was one set of circumstances and “now that faith has come” there is a different set of circumstances that apply to men and women. When we use the word ‘faith’ we say things like: ‘She has great faith in her abilities’, or ‘his blind faith in her proved to be disastrous’, or ‘I have great faith in her’. All these phrases use ‘faith’ in terms of what an individual has or does not have. The phrases also indicate that a person relies on their personal and inward faith. But the phrase ‘now that faith has come’ suggests something that is not generated by an individual person. The phrases Paul uses seem to be like, for example, these phrases - ‘before Governor Philip

came the country was x or y', and 'after Governor Philip came the country was b or c'. But if this is the case what does Paul mean? Whose is the faith that has come? What faith has changed the circumstances of human beings? The answer to these questions is that it is the faith of *Christ*. Christians, as I pointed out before, have been taught to believe that it is *their* faith in Christ that changes their lives. But Paul says that it is *through* the faith of Christ that the circumstances of humanity are changed.

Now if we think about what Paul has said at least two important matters are manifested. The first, and I have already alluded to this, is that faith is an action. This is to say that faith is not a *passive* mental feeling. Instead faith makes new things possible. We know, for example, that the faith parents may have in a child who seems to have squandered many opportunities actually enables the child to not despair and give up altogether. This faith is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling but is a reality that is manifested by constantly acting to help the child continue on with their life and, where possible, make new beginnings. This is an analogy for what Paul means when he says that the faith makes new things possible for humanity.

The second matter that is important is this: what does Christ have faith in? The answer is *not* that Christ Jesus has faith in human beings. Rather Christ has faith in the promise that God made to Israel, and it is his faithfulness to that promise that actualises it. The promise of God to Israel was an act of new creation to renew the world and humanity in the purpose and image of God. Christ's faithfulness to this promise is made concrete in the way he pours himself out in love for humanity on the cross. The result of Christ's faithfulness to the promise is that the world is infected by the purpose of God. It is this infection that, fundamentally, is our justification. For to be justified is to live in a world made right in the purpose of God.

Concretely what this infection causes, according to Paul, is a new social reality. It has to be said that what Paul had to say about this new reality in the letter to the Galatians has often become the playground of different groups pushing social causes and agendas. People with

various views about race, class, and gender have used Paul's statement that there is 'no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female', to advance their own agendas. While recognising the contemporary significance of these agendas, it is important to understand that what Paul is claiming is that God creates a new community through the faithfulness of Christ. In this new community it is not ethnic, social, and sexual differences that vanish, but rather it is one in which hostility and chauvinism, and the superiority and inferiority between categories, that are destroyed. Being in Christ does not do away with Jew or Greek and male or female, but it makes these differences before God irrelevant. In the new community actualised by the faithfulness of Christ to the promise of new creation, the destructive violence that often characterises relationships between different groups is ended. How Paul sees this occurring in various human social institutions can be seen in his letters, for example, to the Christians in Ephesus and to Philemon.

What I have tried to do today is to show how, according to St Paul, we live not out of own faith, but out of the faith of Jesus Christ. This means, according to Paul we are not self-made men and women. Instead we are those who inhabit a world that is being recreated through the costly faith of Christ to the promise of God for his creation and his creatures. I tried to show that we get an imperfect glimpse of what this means by stating that in human relationships it is sometimes the faithfulness of others that gives us freedom and space to experience the grace of new beginnings. I have tried to show with Paul that what we can rely on is not our faith, but rather the faith of Christ Jesus and what that is accomplishing for the world. It is in this way that we truly live by faith!