

313 Liberty and Love

Last week we were reminded that by our faith in Christ we are “overcomers of the world” (I John 5.4-5), a God-given status which gives us the grounds, and the responsibility, to make known the Christian Gospel in these increasingly chaotic times. As we see wherever we care to look - in the shops, on the roads, at work, in the House of Commons and across the media – the reality of Jesus Christ as mankind’s Risen Lord, Saviour and Master matters “not a jot” to the great majority of people. Instead we are once again passing through the annual glut of Santa, snowmen, strife and stress!

It is significant that we have no suggestion in the Gospels or Epistles that Jesus’ actual birthday was ever marked each year either by Jesus and His disciples or by the members of the Church after His ascension. Instead the emphasis is on the wonderful truth of the incarnation itself, God-with-us, here in our midst as One of us (egs., Matthew 1.20b-23 / Luke 1.31-35 & 2.10-11 / John 1.1-14 / Philippians 2.5-11 / Colossians 1.15-20). Jesus is given by God the Father to open the way back for us into fellowship with Almighty God our Creator, a task which Jesus alone, in His sinless humanity, was capable of achieving (eg., I Timothy 2.5-6). So even in that Bethlehem stable there was the shadow of the cross that was yet to come, followed by the triumphs of Resurrection and Ascension.

Now therefore, through Christ, “the kingdom of heaven is open to all believers” as the old ‘Te Deum’ puts it (egs., Colossians 1.9-14 / I Thessalonians 2.12 / Hebrews 12.28 / James 2.5 / II Peter 1.11). As we well know, but many do not yet know, the key to our entering that kingdom for ourselves is “belief” - that simple, personal faith that Jesus Christ is telling the truth, and indeed IS the Truth, with all that that implies (John 14.6).

But from the earliest days of the Church this Gospel of “salvation by faith alone in Christ alone” was strongly challenged, notably by believers of Jewish background within the Church. They assumed that this new Gospel of grace actually meant – “salvation is gained by faith in Christ AND by our still keeping the Jewish Law”: they could not, or would not, accept that the righteous demands of the old Mosaic Law had been fully met by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross (eg., Romans 5.6-21).

This tension is the background to Paul’s Epistle to the churches of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey, where the ex-Jewish Christians were telling the ex-Gentile Christians to hand over their baby sons for circumcision: a classic example of an apparently trivial issue representing a far greater issue – the very nature of the Gospel itself, which the Holy Spirit, through Paul, was quick to emphasise (egs., Galatians 1.6-10 & 2.16-21 & 3.21-22).

“O foolish Galatians” is the verdict! - they have been “bewitched” to turn away from the plain Gospel truth centred in Jesus Christ the Crucified One (3.1, KJV). The Law could thus now be seen as “our school master, to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (3.24, KJV). The Law therefore had, and has, done its main job, no longer playing a part in terms of salvation, but still playing a part in guiding human conduct.

Hence the Holy Spirit teaches us, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5.1, KJV: that “yoke of bondage” being the obligation to keep to endless rules in an effort to achieve our salvation by human effort or goodness). Rather, “... ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (5.13-14, KJV). We praise God for this clear explanation of the relationship between our liberty in Christ on the one hand, and our living lives of practical love within that liberty on the other.

We are well aware from the Acts and the Epistles that Paul and his colleagues often suffered greatly in their proclamation of this Gospel of grace, and Christ’s “faithful sheep” of today will be no strangers to experiencing similar treatment at times. “The world”, dominated by Satan behind the scenes of course (egs., Matthew 4.8-9 & 13.37-40 / Ephesians 6.11-13 / I Peter 5.8), has always hated this message, which smashes human pride and points mankind instead to the Saviour on the cross (egs., Ephesians 2.8-10 / Galatians 6.14-15).

In the comings and goings of this busy season, may our homes remain places of Gospel liberty and Gospel love, where Jesus Christ is welcomed and worshipped as “God with us”, our crucified, risen and ascended Saviour and Lord!

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