

NEW CREATION – OLD BARRIERS DOWN

(Galatians 6.11-18 and Luke 13.10-17)

Introduction

Greetings from the Settles in Thornaby; we pray you will receive this message with open hearts and minds. It will be great when we are all together 'physically' in St Mary's, but for now as Paul did in the early days of our church, we join together with God's Holy Spirit to share his good news.

Here in 2020 with a world preoccupied with the Coronavirus it seems that's all there is to talk about; well at least it's taken our minds off Brexit. As Christians though, isn't this an opportunity to dig deeper into our faith, to read his word more, to reach out more to our neighbours (from a safe distance) and yes, and to pray more.

We have certainly found it easier to pray in our house and pray we must! for ourselves, our families, our friends, our neighbours and our world. These are defining days in the countdown to when Jesus returns for his bride, the church.

Barriers

The title of today's talk is 'new creation – old barriers down'. I thought it should be new barriers up! These past few weeks, all I have read about is the new ways on how we are going to live in our society in the coming weeks, months and even years.

Social distancing, hand sanitizing, wearing masks, online shopping (if you can find a slot). The list goes on and you can easily get disgruntled; but wait what about the title for today? And how it works for us as Christians in the 21st century, more on that later but first let's look at our readings for today.

I love reading books like Galatians, so full of Christ, his cross and the antics of his followers. Paul even had to reprimand Peter, for his failings. But he always acknowledges his own mistakes too.

Back in 55 A.D. Paul writes to a group of churches in Asia Minor, this is during his 3rd missionary journey. He wants to highlight a key problem that is developing; how do the Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Christ exist together; how do they manage their different cultures, their different sets of rules.

Rules and Freedom

The gospel message of the cross of Jesus Christ is that Christians are now able to live in freedom made possible by Jesus dying on the cross as a perfect sacrifice to God, then 3 days later rising again in his resurrection body and by the impartation of the Holy Spirit to his followers at Pentecost.

The problem being that the believers who were brought up under the religious law; 'The law of Moses' wanted to bring the non-Jewish believers under the same law. Paul was having none of it; Ironic really because Paul had been the most zealous of Jews in trying to live by the 613 regulations, that they are meant to keep. If you mess up on only one of them you are cursed, not even just the ten commandments but 613! Boy am I glad I didn't live in the old testament era.

It's the same problem for us, when we try to live out our Christian lives by only following the rules of our church. You, me, any of us. We can't keep all the rules; not even for a day without failing.

When we try to live that way, we must make God mad. He didn't send his Son, his only Son to live a perfect life on earth, to be humiliated by everyone, beaten and tortured, hung on the bough of a tree and crucified just so we can say 'rule number one says we must do this today'. I don't think so!

No! We must always stay/walk/live in the freedom that was bought for us at the expense of Jesus, the Son of God, dying to self, *completely*. 'It's only by grace can we enter, only by grace can we stand. Not by our human endeavour but by the blood of the lamb' Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Please hear me, I am not saying that rules are not important. Of course, we need some rules to be able to organize our lives but they should not define us as followers of Christ. When I gave my life to Jesus as a young boy; I didn't know or understand how churches work? I probably don't know much now to be honest.

Over 30 years ago now; I met Pamela Birtle when we volunteered to run a group of tearaway boys on behalf of Social Services, attempting to divert them from their wayward lives of crime, violence and vandalism. I always remember when Pam asked them to make up the set of rules for our group! I was amazed when they came up with rule after rule; this from a bunch of unruly lads, who couldn't even keep the peace.

That's the trouble with rules, we all break them one way or another. So, on the one side of freedom in Christ we have the pitfall of 'law/legalism' but on the other side, waiting to trip us up and deny us freedom in Christ we have 'licence' or works of the flesh.

Now here is where I really fell out with God, big style: Having been saved from sin and death by accepting Jesus as my saviour; I very quickly joined another group, in my thinking? "I am now a Christian, so I can do almost what I like and God through Jesus will always forgive me? Right? *Wrong!*" Jesus does forgive us, but it is not the way to live as a Christian. It is certainly not in freedom and you pay a price for your actions.

It's much better to live in the freedom of knowing that it's because of everything that Jesus did and nothing that I did. I spent 20 years away from God; would I have been saved if I had died in that period? Well thank God I don't need to find out.

The Holy Spirit

Back to the title bit; old barriers are indeed coming down; it's true the church doors are closed and we can't even meet in our homes for fellowship. But a new way, a more creative way, a move of the Holy Spirit, has meant that the people of Teesside, well everywhere, I guess. Christians are now praying together; Hallelujah. Admittedly through ways that are not always easy for some of us to find.

Using the Internet to FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, YouTube and others to create prayer rooms, church services and lots of activities for all those home-based children, bless them. It may be alien to many of us but I am sure that given time, more and more people will find easier ways to communicate electronically. We pray that it will become available to all of us and very soon.

Personally, we seem to be sharing our faith with our neighbours far more than we ever did and we have lived in this cul-de-sac for 20 years this May. People are more open to hearing the good news and having their prayers heard and I am sure that once this outbreak is over, we will hear testimonies of God's saving grace.

Indeed, we are already hearing some good news through our television sets, online or via our phones. Social media can be a blessing to transport our good news but it also provides the enemy with a tool to harm us, I recently had a bad response from an old acquaintance but no harm done and now I pray for him (John in Holland) more often.

Conclusion

The gospel story we read of Jesus healing the woman, who was a victim of a spirit of Infirmary for 18 years, is so clear about our need to avoid this kind of religion.

Why anyone would criticize an act of such compassion is beyond me. But we do, don't we, at times? When we see or hear things happening that we don't understand or we can't fit into our own idea of Christianity.

Are we capable of using the law to justify what we do in society and even in our own Christian lives? If it's not the law/legalism that we are trapped by; what about our works of flesh/licence? Oh well, we may say 'I gave my life to Jesus, I am a Christian, so I can still do some bad things some times and get away with it? Can we really keep doing this?

Following on from John's talk last week; I too have a story about the late Dr. W.E. Sangster, that illustrates how easily we can get it wrong.

Dr. Sangster went to visit a dying woman in hospital. He said to her "Are you ready to meet God? What will you say to him?" She held up her worn hands and said "I am a widow, I have brought up 5 children, so I have no time for church or the bible or anything religious. But I have done my best for my children, and when I see God, I will just hold up these hands, and he will look at them and he will understand."

The Doctor replied "You are too late, my dear, you are too late. There is somebody who has got in front of you, and he is holding up his hands in front of God, and God has eyes for no other. Don't put your trust in your hands, put your trust in His hands."

That's what legalism or even licence does to us, it takes away our freedom to be in Christ. If we have given our lives to Jesus, we are now a new creation. Let's bring those walls down, those barriers that we were brought up on and have lived with for far too long.

Let's use our faith in God's word to declare we are born again into the body of Christ; we are no longer separate individuals, one a Jew, another a Greek, one a slave and another free, one male and another female. All of us make up just one person inside Jesus. Together we are the body of Christ.

Galatians 6:18, paraphrased; May the generous love of Jesus, our divine Master and anointed Saviour, fill our inmost being, my brothers and sisters. So be it.