

Sunday 23rd January 2022 – The Gift of Surrender to God (Galatians 2:19-21, Matthew 16:21-27)

This year is the 50th anniversary of the United Reformed Church. I imagine most of you thought it was a lot older than that: and it is, because the church itself is the coming together of two much older movements: the Presbyterian Church and the Lutheran Church, which both go back to the 16th century. I mention for this for two reasons - well, three really, as we will certainly be having a party of some sort to celebrate later in the year! We are an ecumenical church, and the United Reformed Church is one of our sponsors.

The first reason is that this week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – something very dear to our hearts, and the United Reformed Church is a wonderful demonstration of that desire for unity, that we as God's people would be one, just as Jesus prays for us in John chapter 17. We'll be celebrating our unity and praying for more of it on Tuesday – the details are on the church emails.

The second is that Martin Luther, who was the founder of the Lutheran Church is where I want to start today in looking at these two passages. Luther is really a great example of what the passage from Galatians means. Perhaps you listened to those words of St Paul: 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me,' and wondered what on earth he's trying to say?

Luther helps us to understand. Before Luther became famous as one of the leaders of the Reformation he was a devout monk for many years. He invested huge amounts of energy in trying to develop a deep spiritual life. He was a model of discipline and penance, of self-denial and even self-torture. Luther later admitted: 'If ever someone could be saved by monkery (i.e. being a monk), it was me.' Once he went to Rome, to climb the Scala Sancta – the sacred stairway – on hands and knees. He toiled upwards, seeking to earn merit with God – and suddenly there came to him a voice from heaven: 'The just shall live by *faith*.' **The life he was seeking could not be earned by never-ending, ever-defeated effort:** it could only be received through the love and mercy of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Similarly St. Paul knew that same journey: he had devoted the best years of his life to following the whole of the law with total rigour: but had found it only made him proud and prone to violence. Christ had shown him a new way, and **the only way to life, he now realised, was by following Christ completely**. And so he wrote these dynamic words to describe his own spiritual journey: 'I died to the law,' he says, as he realised it couldn't either win him favour with God or change his heart. Instead, the path to life was found in trusting Christ completely, supremely Christ's death and resurrection. So he wrote: 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'

From now on, in other words, it's all about Jesus. And let's be clear here, that this is not another form of self-help, that our salvation is now measured by how much we follow Jesus, rather than how well we obey the rules. Jesus has already done everything necessary to save us: it is an amazing, life-giving gift which we simply receive.

But it does start to address the question: well, if we're saved by God's grace – God's gift to us – how do we actually live? If it's not about how well we follow the rules, what is it about?

And the answer is that **it's all about living in union with Jesus**. Our lives become bound up with his. That's what Paul's getting at when he talks about dying with Jesus and also rising to new life with Jesus. Our lives are bound up with Jesus, and so the way to live from now on is to move towards that place of total surrender to Jesus, so that his motivations are ours, his lifestyle is ours, his love and compassion is what beats in our hearts, and we make all our choices as he would make them.

It's no longer about rules, but it is a big ask! And none of us can say we've got there completely – which is why we always come back to grace, to God's wonderful mercy. But that is the goal now: to identify with Jesus.

And part of that includes the hard stuff as well as the nice stuff. Yes, following Christ involves peace and joy and purpose and community, and lots of amazing things to warm our hearts. But Jesus also talks quite openly about the other side, as we saw in our gospel reading. **He also calls us to deny self and take our cross and follow him**. To put Jesus first sometimes involves us making hard or costly choices, or facing something else that we might call a cross.

Interestingly, Martin Luther preached on this passage in 1530, and his reflections are insightful. He begins by suggesting that true crosses are *not* ones we choose for ourselves. We don't seek suffering, but we do have to navigate it when it comes. And Luther offers a couple of pointers as to how we survive periods of trial. The first is that it gives us great comfort to know that we follow a Saviour who trod this way before us. In suffering we identify with Christ more completely than in any other part of life. And Jesus is right there with us, because it is both who he is and what he came to do.

Second, we learn about the power of God's word in times of trial. As Luther puts it in typically vivid language: we 'learn from our own experience that the small, weak, miserable Word is stronger than the devil and the gates of hell.'

Finally, periods of trial develop inner strength which sustains us for times to come. We discover reserves we didn't realise we had. In particular, the 'monkish' side of Luther never forgot that actually the good times are when we are most likely to fold spiritually. We may like to imagine that the strength we get from good times is what carries us through the hard: but Luther turns this on its head by saying it's more like the other way round: the strength we find in times of trial are what carries through the easier times when it's easy for us to get 'sleepy', as he calls it.

So to finish back with the Wise Men, whose gifts are guiding us through this season: the gift of myrrh is the gift of surrender to God, of allowing ourselves to identify fully with Jesus, in his death as well as his resurrection. For in letting go of our old selves we find new selves, united with Jesus and filled with his life. As we share bread and wine in a few moments, we remind ourselves that this is the path Jesus trod before us, the supreme act of offering, that we might find this new way of life. And may God grant us grace to offer ourselves to this Christ, and so find true life. Amen.