

18 June 2023

Genesis 18:1-15 [21:1-7]

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8 [9-23]

I was sad to read this week about a case currently before the Supreme Court in which the children of a man who died in 2016 are contesting the will. When the man discovered he had cancer he went to his lawyer's office and changed his will to create a trust that stripped away all the available assets, and established as the beneficiaries of the trust the children of another woman with whom he'd had a brief relationship. The case is about whether the father had a duty to provide for his children, even after 30 years of no contact. They were completely estranged from each other – the result of the years of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse the father had perpetrated against them.¹

It is sadly common enough for estrangement to occur within families; and sadly usually for reasons a great deal less weighty than the horrific history of abuse in this case. In my own family history I know of two brothers who had no contact for many years, the latter years of their long lives, because someone made an off-hand ill-considered remark to which the other took offence. These breaches are dreadfully sad.

In relation to the current Court case, I find myself reflecting that there is a huge distinction between, on the one hand, the legal standing that the children might achieve if the Court finds in their favour, and, on the other, the relational position. If the Court finds in favour of the children, they will be legally restored to being heirs of their father. But this finding does nothing to bring about any change in the relationship: legal heirs they may become, but regarding him as their father and themselves has his children, in any sense of the fullness of those terms, is a different question entirely. (And while you might quibble that a restoration is impossible due to their father's death, we know that it is possible to bring about a different quality of relationship, or feeling about, those we have lost to this life.)

¹ "Case of abusive father outlined", *The Post*, Thursday June 15 2023, p.10

I think this distinction is helpful when we come to reflect on Romans 5. Paul asserts that we have been “justified” on the basis of faith. This is like the legal finding in our favour, which restores our standing.

But before we go further we need to remind ourselves of why such a restoration of our standing with God might be necessary. Paul uses various terms to explain this: we are ungodly², we are sinners³, we are enemies⁴, hostile to God. Humankind is estranged from God, set about going our own way, usurping God’s authority over our lives, worshipping aspects of creation rather than their Creator.

At our own personal level we may not often think of it in those big terms, but on reflection – and perhaps as we contemplate the guilt we feel as we try to hide or excuse even our little failings – we *know* that it is true that we just don’t measure up to God’s perfect will for us.

But, Paul asserts, because of what Jesus has done on the cross, God has entered the verdict in our favour, bringing us into right standing with the Father again.

And thankfully, unlike the case with which I began, the good news is that this legal verdict also changes the relationship. “Paul is talking about a reconciliation to end all reconciliations. ‘Since we have been declared to be in the right, we have’ – what? a warm glow in the heart? a sigh of relief that our sins have been forgiven? a new understanding of what it means to belong to God’s people? Yes, all of those and more, but at the centre of it all we have *peace with God* ... the establishment of a loving, welcoming personal relationship between individual humans and the creator God himself.”⁵ “If justification declares us righteous in God’s courtroom, reconciliation invites us to take a seat at God’s dinner table. Justification is the restoration of right legal status; reconciliation is about the restoration of friendship.”⁶

Far from being the abusive father of my opening example, God the Father is infinitely good and loving. Far from being estranged from us, God enters into our very

² Romans 5:6

³ Romans 5:8

⁴ Romans 5:10

⁵ Wright, *Paul*, p.81

⁶ John Frederick, “Commentary”

humanity. Far from securing his assets so we can't access them, God wants to give us the kingdom.

God the Father Almighty, creator and sustainer of all that is, king and judge of all ... *loves us*. Isn't that the most profoundly wonderful thing?!

We who have received Christ have all this already, and can day-by-day grow into the fullness of its blessing. But what of those who have not received Jesus as their Lord?

The first thing we need to remember is that God's love is directed to all; God longs to bring all into his embrace: as the prologue to John's Gospel declares, "to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God"⁷.

The second thing we need to remember is summarised in Jesus' words as he commissioned the apostles: "Freely you have received; freely give."⁸ We have done nothing to deserve God's favour towards us, nothing to earn the verdict of righteousness handed down to us. It is a free gift of God. It should therefore be freely shared with others.

When we are brought into right standing with God and reconciled to him who is our Almighty Father, we find that he wants to not only enjoy the rich beauty of this new found relationship, but to draw us into the service of his kingdom purpose – gathering all into his love. But working for his kingdom will bring us all kinds of challenges because of the ongoing effects of humankind and a world still not fully brought into right relationship with him and his purposes. It is hard, and we will need to hang in there, in faith and hope, even when we don't feel like it, even when we go through times when he might seem far from us again, or even when we don't see the effects of his kingly reign as we would like.

⁷ John 1:12

⁸ Matthew 10:8

But hang in there we do, because we can celebrate the bigger reality. We celebrate in the midst of our sufferings, because we know that this suffering is not all there is and it is not all that matters. We celebrate in this midst of our sufferings because we know the value of the cause for which we suffer. I use the analogy of the sense of loss we experience when a grown child leaves home: while we suffer in our missing of them, we rejoice at what this means for their development of independence and contribution to society.

We also rejoice because we find, over time, that these sufferings – while not *caused* by God – are used by God to gradually transform us, making us more fully the people we were made to be: “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope”.⁹ These are the attributes, the tools, we need so we can endure as we fulfil God’s commission to us. We’re going to need these attributes because we will encounter setbacks and disappointment; we will face sacrifice of opportunity and status and wealth, perhaps even relationships, in our faithful following of God’s way for us; we will endure misunderstanding, mockery and insult; we will suffer constraints on our freedoms, physical harm, imprisonment, perhaps even death.

The end of chapter 9 of Matthew marks a turning point. Matthew starts by summarising what Jesus was doing:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.¹⁰

So far it has been a solitary mission: Jesus on his own undertaking this work. The turn comes when he asks the disciples to move from merely being with him and observing, to acting in sincere imitation of him. It begins with prayer:

⁹ Romans 5:3-4

¹⁰ Matthew 9:35-36

“Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”¹¹

If we have any compassion, if we have any sense of the need of humankind, and at the same time any understanding of God’s redeeming love for these people, surely we are motivated to pray that God will meet that need.

And then no sooner than they are commanded to pray than they find that they are expected to be part of the answer to their own prayer:

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions, “... proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.”¹²

And it is now that these twelve are referred to as “apostles”, meaning literally “sent ones”.

In the Nicene Creed we affirm that “we believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” The focus of the word “apostolic” in reflections on the Creed is often on the sense of the line of ordained ministry stretching back unbroken back to Peter, and on the sense of historical continuity of the church’s teaching. We do well to reflect that what this apostolic succession and historical continuity is *for* is so that the church continues to hand down the church from one generation to the next.¹³ The sent ones hand down their “sent-ness” to the generations that follow them.

Just as Jesus commissioned and sent the twelve apostles so he also commissions and sends us. The work to be done remains vast. It is evident that there is great spiritual hunger in our community today. But we need to remember that there are now several generations who have not heard anything of the Bible or of the good news that is Jesus Christ. It is all too easy for us to present our message in ways

¹¹ Matthew 9:37-38

¹² Matthew 10:1, 5a, 7-8

¹³ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, p.88

that are unintelligible or even offensive; it is all too easy for us as to come across as moralistic and judgemental. That means that we must keep our motivation tied into God's love, and our approach having the humility that comes from recalling that we ourselves have been saved only through God's grace.

God the Father is infinitely good and loving: goodness and love needs to be both our motivation and approach. God enters into our very humanity: we need to enter the worlds of those to whom we are sent – a posture of listening for understanding is a good start. God wants to give us the kingdom: we have this kingdom gift to share but not to impose by force.

“Freely you have received; freely give.”

Sources

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