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If Children, Then Also Heirs (Galatians 3: 1-5, 23 – 4:7)

Lent 4

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Once more I'll begin by reminding us where we've come from, and where we're going in our reflections over this Lenten season. As those of you following along will know, I've been hoping to offer ways of relating to one of the key New Testament metaphors for characterising the work and the meaning of Christ – the metaphor of reconciliation. So far in our series, we've explored the whole question of what it is that needs reconciling. We've also explored how it is that Christ's dying 'for us' enables this reconnection, this restoration and healing. Over the next three weeks, I want us to look more closely at what inhabiting this new reality actually looks like – what receiving this gift of reconciliation enables. Next week, we'll look at its effect on divisions between and within human communities; the week after that we'll consider its significance for the renewal of the whole creation, what Paul calls the 'reconciliation of all things'. But first things first; this week, we're focusing on what it means and how it matters to know ourselves reconciled to God. And this brings us to the passage we've just read from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

This letter is 'one of the bits of Paul's work where his temper really seriously runs ahead of him'. So says Rowan Williams – and it's true that Paul 'addresses the Galatians as idiots at one point'.¹ But the reason for his anger is instructive for our purposes. Because what makes Paul so irate is that these new Galatian Christians are in the process of moving *from* a state of human liberty back into a state of religious slavery, *from* a place of radical intimacy and reconciliation with God back into separation and un-relatedness. They had seemed to accept Christ's gift of homecoming, but now it's clear they've not realised what they've been given and

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.34.

they're allowing it to be taken away. I think that if we unpack what's going on here, it might help us more fully appreciate what this rather abstract notion of being 'reconciled to God' could mean for us.

The occasion of Paul's fiery letter is an event in the life of the Galatian Christian community. What's happening is that pressure has been exerted on these newly converted Gentiles to put themselves under the authority of the law of Moses. Certain Christian teachers of Jewish origin are telling them they need to become Jews in order to follow Christ – they need to be circumcised, to follow Jewish dietary rules and so on. And the Galatians seem inclined to go along with this. But for Paul, this is a sign that they really haven't grasped the gospel, they haven't understood what being Christian is actually about. They're returning to the archaic idea that what God requires of human beings is some kind of religious performance, 'works of the law'; they're buying into the view that belonging in the community depends on successful enactment of some sort of prescribed ritual practice.² But, says Paul, the whole point of Christ is to do away with these kinds of condition for accessing and belonging to God.

All this gets fairly convoluted in Paul's exposition and, of course, the whole symbol system he's working with is strange to us. But the essential point he's making is that what's on offer through Christ is a whole new level of intimacy with God. Christian faith is not a relationship of nervous supplicant to capricious deity, nor of dutiful law-keeper to stern guardian, but of familial love and mutual indwelling. The metaphors Paul invokes depict a shift in the human relationship with God as from a state of slavery (fear, obligation and unfreedom) to a state of childhood (trust, joyful dependence and freedom). Through Christ, we're being adopted as God's own children, Paul says, not because we've earned it, not because our works have made us deserving of it, but because it is God's good pleasure. And all there is for us to do in order to receive our adoption is to give our consent, to trust the gift. The minute

² Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, p.34.

you go back to trying to earn your belonging, or perform for it or control it, you lose it. You put yourself back into the old pattern of separation and striving to 'make it', and it's precisely from this 'conditional, anxious approach to belonging that [we're supposed to] have been liberated'.³

But why would you want to go back, as the Galatians seem to? What's the attraction of it? Well, the thing with law-keeping is you know when you've done it. It enables you to keep track of and evaluate your own (and others') righteousness. But trusting dependence – that's a much deeper, more subtle, more self-implicating process. It requires you to give up the seductive certainty of 'the Law' for receptivity to the Spirit, it requires you to be as vulnerable as a child – clothed not in anything you've secured for yourself, but only ever in what is being given to you. And for Paul that's what faith is – a state of continuous trust in the trustworthiness and self-giving of God. It's the consent to source your entire life in the word of promise.

So what does this actually mean for how we live? How does this state of trust and intimacy show up in our lives? In the first instance, as Paul notes, it affects how we see and relate to one another. The immediate social consequence of knowing ourselves as 'all children of God through faith' is that distinctions between classes of human being will no longer operate in the same way. For those who are 'clothed with Christ', Paul writes, there is 'no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'. It's not that there are no longer differences between people – ethnicities, genders, social classes remain. But in Christ, these differences no longer justify law-based distinctions concerning people's value or belonging or belovedness; they no longer justify treating some with less regard than others. If God has called them all, then who are you to judge or diminish them? We're to recognise that underneath all the

³ Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, p.34.

variations of human being and situation is a deeper and more abiding unity, grounded in nothing less than our shared parentage in God.

Being reconciled to God in this radical way also affects our conception and practice of prayer. Because now that we know ourselves intimately joined to the life of God through the Spirit who dwells within us, we can no longer pray to God as simply 'out there', apart from and over against us, someone we're trying get something from. In fact, the more wholly we receive our adoption, the more completely we become at one with God, the more realise we're not so much saying 'our' prayers as participating in prayer itself – God's own self-communication. Jesus in John's gospel expresses the invitation to this participation when he says: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (John 15: 15). And in a different idiom, Paul: 'you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir' – that is, one who is to grow into the responsibilities of full stewardship.

In this vision, Christian life is about being drawn to the inside of God's life, and so being called to a new kind of maturity and involvement in God's mission. Paul says that what the Spirit prays in us is '*Abba!* Father!' which is Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. Being reconciled to God means standing where Jesus stands, joined with him in the work of transfiguring love, handed over like him through the Spirit for the life of the world. This, for me, is the heart of our contemplative practice ... a daily commitment to join in the prayer of the indwelling Spirit.

And finally, I want to suggest that being reconciled, joined to God in this way should be leading us to be, paradoxically, less religious. The early Christians were considered 'atheists' because they didn't have any practice that was recognisably religious in the ancient world – no dietary rules, no sacrifices, no statues of deities, no rules of association. To be Christian meant simply learning to be human in a different way, transformed from within by the Spirit and participating in God's

radical love for all the world. Maybe that's what was so disorienting for the Galatians. Paul chastises them: 'Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods ... How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted' (4: 8-11). But it's as though the Galatians dare not believe they can let all this stuff go.

In the final year of his life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell: 'During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus* [a religious man], but simply a [human being], as Jesus was a [human being].⁴ And he went on: 'it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith ... In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; ... and that is how one becomes human and a Christian'.⁵ No longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir – recipients of and participants in God's ministry reconciliation.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Abridged Edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge with new introduction by Samuel Wells (London: SCM Press, 2017), p.136.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p.137.