

Paul's story and God's story

12 June 2022

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS

There is a story of a mother talking to her young daughter who is painting a picture of God. The mother cautions the girl that no one really knows what God is like or what God looks like. Quick as a flash, the girl responds – they'll know just as soon as I've finished my picture!

Today is Trinity Sunday, when we're invited to reflect on the nature of God and how God has been revealed to us. The unique view of Christians is to name God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – not three gods but one God revealed in three different ways.

There have been various ways of thinking about God, many of them unhelpful whether as a triangle or a hierarchy ... but perhaps it's more helpful to think of the three in a circle, which has no beginning or end ... or even as a dance ... a community.

The amazing part is that God invites us to be part of this loving, caring, outward looking community. We're going to sing now about different ways that we might conceive of God ... none of these is complete of course, but they give us something to think about.



SONG TiS 182 Bring many names (verses 1-3, 6)

Bring many names, beautiful and good,
celebrate, in parable and story,
holiness in glory,
living, loving God.

Hail and hosanna! Bring many names!

Strong mother God, working night and day,
planning all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation,

genius at play:

Hail and hosanna, strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living,
caring and forgiving
till we're reconciled:

Hail and hosanna, warm father God!

[Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
glad of good surprises,
wiser than despair:

Hail and hosanna, old, aching God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,
crying out for justice,
giving all you have:

Hail and hosanna, young, growing God!]

Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing,
everlasting home:

Hail and hosanna, great, living God!

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BIBLE READING

Galatians 1-2

Paul, an apostle – sent not by human hand, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.

To the churches in Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from

heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! ...

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. ... Rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord's brother. ... Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: 'The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they praised God because of me.

Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

As for those who were held in high esteem – they recognised that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. ... James, Peter and John, those esteemed as pillars of the church, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. ...

But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they

arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?'

We who are Jews by birth ... know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. ...

[Romans 5:1-5](#)

One of the set readings for Trinity Sunday and very relevant in the face of all that is happening in the world today ...

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

MESSAGE [Paul's story and God's story](#)

As humans, we are born storytellers.

Whenever we catch up with friends or family, and whenever we meet clients at Helping Hand or guests here at Croydon North for our Tuesday lunches, we share stories. I hear a bit more of your story and you hear a bit more of my story ... and soon enough the stories become our shared story.



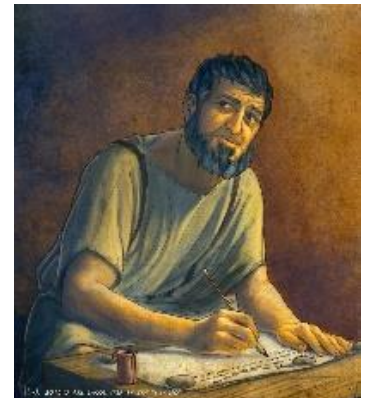


Stories tell us who we are, how we understand our place in the world and about our priorities. As people of faith, our stories also show us how our story intersects with and forms part of **God's** bigger story, the story that stretches all the way back to creation.



Today we get a rare glimpse into the life story of **Paul the apostle** and how his story was **transformed** when it met God's story about Jesus. Paul uses his story to introduce his letter to the churches in Galatia that we will be exploring over the next four Sundays.

Paul's story begins as a **zealous Jew**. In his letter to the church in Philippi we find out that Paul was a **Pharisee**, part of a sect that meticulously followed every aspect of the Jewish Law in painstaking detail. We may recall that Jesus had frequent run-ins with the Pharisees during his ministry. It's no surprise then that Paul would persecute the followers of Jesus following the events of Easter. Paul probably thought he was doing God's will.



But his life was turned upside-down and was totally **transformed** through an encounter with the risen Jesus, who gives him the task of taking the gospel message to Gentiles, non-Jewish people. Paul becomes a zealous and passionate witness for Jesus and for the church, although he operates quite distinctly

from the other apostles based in Jerusalem.

Paul's mission as he sees it – and as agreed with the church in Jerusalem – is to take the gospel to the Gentiles, non-Jews, while James and Peter and the other apostles take the gospel message mostly to Jews.

The book of Acts fills in more of the back story of Paul's ministry – which is based out of Antioch in northern Syria, where the church sets apart Paul and Barnabas for a mission journey that takes them into Cyprus and Galatia, the central part of modern day Turkey. Paul's mission there and his writing of a letter to the Galatian churches he founded there happen some **20 years after the events of Easter**.

So far, so good. But why the big blow-up with Peter at Antioch?

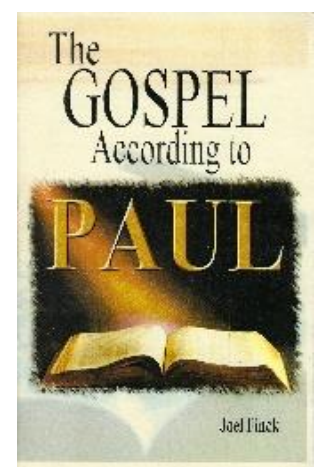
And why is Paul so passionate in what he writes to the Galatian churches?

It comes down to Paul's understanding of the **gospel**, the good news about Jesus Christ. I wonder whether **our** understanding of the gospel aligns with **Paul's** understanding? And whether we could express it in a sentence or three?

We might say that the gospel is all about God's **love** and **acceptance** of every person and the call to **love one another** and to love **our neighbour** as we love ourselves.

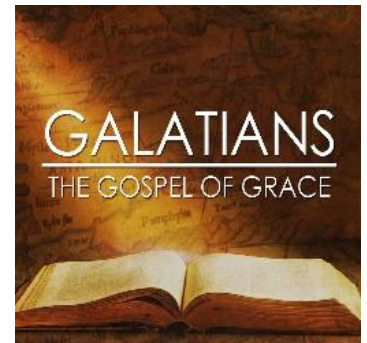
We know Jesus plays a key part as well – and perhaps we might say that Jesus gives us an example to follow, shows us the way to live. And the Spirit? We might say that the Spirit encourages us on our journey and comforts us when times are hard.

These are all true statements about the gospel, but mostly they come from the writings of John and Luke, rather than from Paul. But just as it takes a **whole village to raise a child** according to the African proverb, so it takes the **whole New Testament** to give us a full understanding of the gospel.



Now Paul is nothing if not **passionate** about the gospel message. He stakes his whole life on it, is ridiculed for it, suffers and eventually dies for it, and gives us great insight into what makes the gospel such **good** news.

At its heart for Paul, the gospel is all about **grace** or **favour** – that we receive from God through the person and actions of Jesus – especially his death and resurrection. According to Paul it's never about what **we** have done or achieved by our own efforts or goodness. It's all down to **God's** action and initiative.



This emphasis on grace comes through in *Paul's story* that he shares in the opening chapters of this letter.

- Even while he is an active and violent *persecutor of the church*, Paul receives a *revelation about the gospel directly from Jesus Christ*. He emphasizes that he didn't dream it up or make it up.
- Paul writes that he feels **called by God** – even **compelled** – to share this message with others ... yet only at the right time.
- Paul spends the next 3 years in Arabia, visits Jerusalem briefly to check in with Peter before spending another 14 years living in obscurity in Syria ... before being *set apart by the Holy Spirit* to take the good news into Galatia, which we read about in chapters 13 and 14 of Acts.

So on this Trinity Sunday it's interesting that the gospel comes to Paul through Jesus, through God the Father and through the Holy Spirit. At each step, then, it comes from God's initiative. It's experienced by Paul as **grace** or **favour** since he was actively trying to **stop** the spread of the gospel yet now has experienced first-hand the **forgiveness** and **freedom** that is a central part of the gospel message that he preaches.

I wonder if you experience the gospel as **grace**?

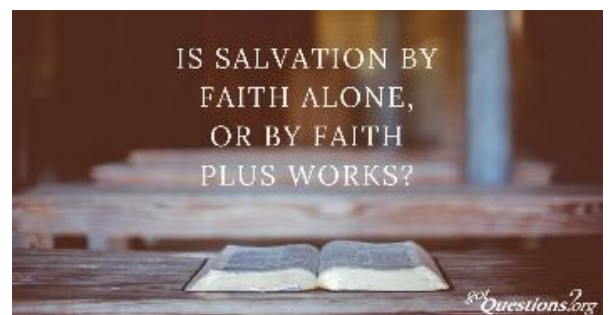
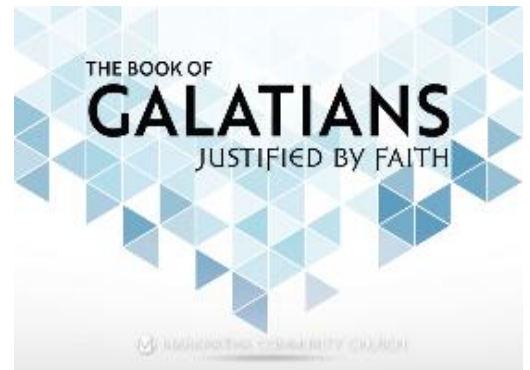
Or whether there are other feelings that creep in ... that I **deserve** God's favour because I'm a good person, or I live a good life, or because I support the work of the church.

And it's here that Paul starts to unpack a second major theme of this letter, namely that the gospel is all about **faith** or **trust**.

This ties in with the second part of Paul's story which is about what happened when Peter was visiting the church in Antioch. As Paul tells the story, Peter was quite okay eating with Gentile believers until certain people from the 'circumcision group' arrive at Antioch – sent by James from the church in Jerusalem. Peter then changes who he eats with and withdraws from eating with Gentiles.

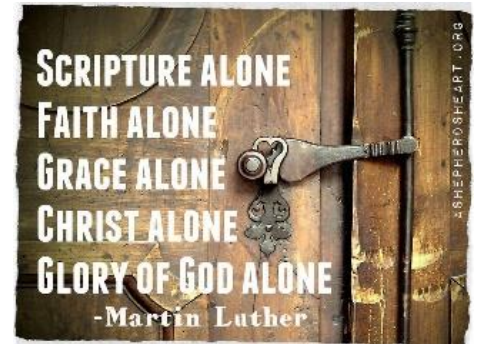
Paul gets quite angry about this and tells Peter to his face that he is not acting in line with the gospel, but instead is siding with the Jewish believers who demanded that Gentiles – non-Jews – be forced to adopt Jewish ways, including circumcision for males. But for Paul there will be no distinctions made between Christians. For him, the truth of the gospel is at stake – and he tells Peter so.

From this episode we learn of Paul's **passion** for the gospel but also that he can be quite divisive. Putting aside these personality traits, the issue for Paul that he will explore further in the next part of the letter is whether we are **justified** – have a right relationship with God – through **faith alone** or faith **plus** something. Paul is adamant that it's faith alone, while those from the Jerusalem church seem to say it's faith **plus** **circumcision**, or faith **plus** **eating the correct clean food**. It's a different but similar issue for us. Do we enjoy right relationship with God by faith alone – or is it faith **plus** **coming to church**, or faith **plus** **good**



deeds? It might seem like a pedantic point to make, but for Paul this question lay at the heart of the gospel. Does our standing with God depend entirely on God's grace and our response of trust – or do our **actions** also affect our standing with God?

As **Protestant** Christians – whether from a Methodist, Presbyterian or Congregational background – the answer has been settled for us through the **Reformation**. It was Martin Luther who argued that we are justified – or saved or made right with God – through faith **alone** and through grace **alone**.

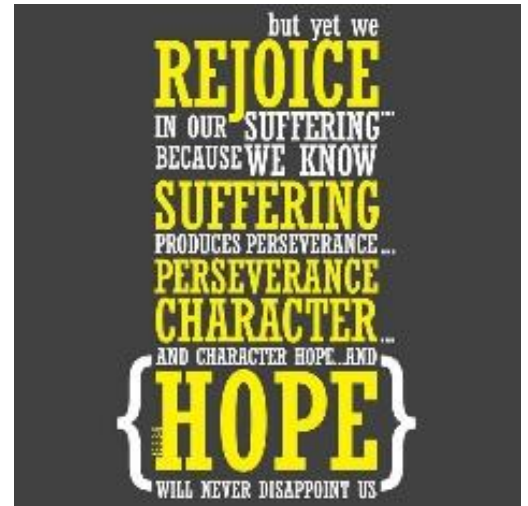


But we don't always act like this or feel like this. We often feel that God can only accept us if we **do** x, y or z first. We're afraid that unless we do x, y or z – which are different for each of us – then we will somehow miss out on God's blessing or God's love. And this can make us feel anxious or unworthy.

One example of this was an elderly lady recently moved to a nursing home who was visited by a new minister. She was distraught that she would not go to heaven since she could no longer arrange the flowers at church. At no time in her long church-attending life, filled with many good deeds, had she ever understood that she did not need to do anything other than trust Jesus, to be accepted by God... until the new minister took time to explain it to her.

Paul's message – that he highlights repeatedly – is that **faith** and **grace** are all that are needed – trust in **God's** initiative, **God's** grace, **God's** favour. That's easy to say, but harder to live out when times are tough and things are not going well. Which brings us, briefly, to our second reading today from the book of Romans, also written by Paul.

The gospel and the Trinity both feature again – we stand in **grace** having been justified with God through **faith** – and so we enjoy **peace** with God through Jesus. Then there's the counter-intuitive part where Paul says we can enjoy relationship with God even in times of **suffering** – because suffering produces **perseverance** that in turn produces **character** and that character leads to **hope**. And don't we need a good injection of hope into the world and into our lives at the moment?



The news these days often seems bleak both overseas and locally – which along with the rather bleak weather recently – and with people getting sick and crazy prices for everything – means that we can get down on the world and down with ourselves.

We need that dose of **hope** in our lives. How does it come? In keeping with our whole message this morning on grace, it comes from God's Spirit pouring God's love and hope into our hearts. Thanks be to God! Amen.