

Children of God through faith

19 June 2022

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

I want to tell you a story about a world-famous tightrope walker called Charles Blondin. He lived about 150 years ago in America and he was a circus performer ... a tightrope walker. One day he decided to do something that no one else had ever done. He stretched a rope all the way across Niagara Falls, probably as far as from here to the far end of Croydon station. The rope was suspended about 50 metres in the air and he promised that on a certain day he would walk across this rope, with nothing beneath him if he fell. I imagine the buzz around town ... do you think he'll really do it? What happens if he falls off? Why would anyone do such a crazy thing ... BTW don't try this at home!

The big day came and lots of people gathered to watch. Blondin started across carrying nothing but a balancing pole. He slowly started off, stumbled a few times but made it all the way across ... and then back again.

Then he tried a few other tricks ... he did it with a blindfold on so he couldn't see. He took a camera across. He did some juggling on the way ... and then he persuaded his friend to allow himself to be piggy-backed across ... he said to his friend just sway with me.

But he had one last trick to do. He got out a wheelbarrow and asked the crowd if they thought he could wheel it across. Oh yes they all shouted – you're the greatest! We believe you can do it! So he hushes the crowd and asks them ... who will volunteer to sit in the wheelbarrow as I push them across?

There was silence. Nobody was prepared to put their trust in Blondin and the tightrope.

The people had faith that Blondin could do it but they wouldn't put that faith into action.



Today we're going to hear a story from the Bible about a man called Abraham, who is sometimes called the father of faith. God asked Abraham to do some amazing things ... and he believed God ... and even more he trusted God and did what God asked of him.

BIBLE READING

Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-6, 17:1-7

The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.'

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

'Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward.'

But Abram said, 'Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.'

Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.' He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ... This is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting

covenant between me and you and your seed after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your seed after you.

Galatians 3

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? ... So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? So also Abraham 'believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Christ redeemed us ... in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say 'and to his seeds', meaning many people, but 'and to your seed', meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: the law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. ...

... Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither

Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

MESSAGE

Last week we talked about stories and how humans are naturally story – tellers. It's no accident then that all four gospels about Jesus are given to us in story form.

Some stories that we tell are private – only to be shared with those who know us well. Other stories are very public – sometimes because of the large impact they make but sometimes because of necessity. So it seems appropriate at the start of Refugee Week to recall a refugee story that has been very public.

Most of us have heard the story of Nades, Priya, Kopika and Tharnicaa Murugappan, a Tamil family, who last weekend were allowed to return to their community in Biloela in Queensland on bridging visas after a very public four year legal and social media battle to let them remain in Australia.



Their story first became public due to the cruel and dramatic way that they were snatched from their home in Biloela at 4 o'clock in the morning and sent to the Immigration Detention Centre here in Melbourne, which is where Liz and I met them. Along the journey, the two children faced medical and emotional trauma, the whole family was almost deported to Sri Lanka before being sent to Christmas Island where the Federal government spent \$7 million to re-open the detention centre there just for this one family. After two years, the younger daughter Tharnicaa became seriously sick and was airlifted to the Childrens Hospital in Perth. Meanwhile their legal case was progressing through the court system at snail's pace.

But after the recent election, the new Labor government acted swiftly to allow the family to return to Biloela. Their story is one of **calculated cruelty** and **meanness** inflicted by our Federal government when what was needed was **compassion** and **understanding**. But the story is also one of **resilience**,

friendship and **hope** and the fight for a fair go.

Their supporters never gave up or lost faith that the family could one day return home to Biloela. These same supporters continue to press the government to grant the family a permanent visa.

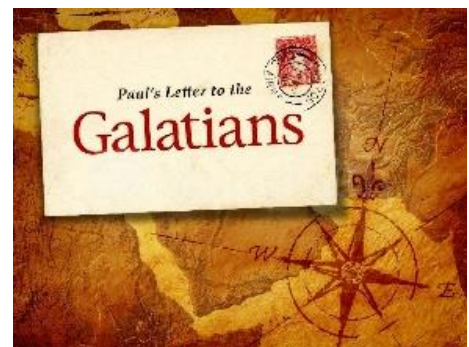
Unfortunately, there are many other stories involving refugees and asylum seekers coming to Australia don't have such a happy ending, as these people continue to live in limbo or remain in detention. You can read some of their stories in this book published last year by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. While the previous government often demonized asylum seekers as 'illegals' and referred to them only with numbers rather than names, they are all people with a story to tell, often a painful and traumatic story. We need to keep pressure on the new government to act on the large backlog of refugee claims.

Last week we also explored a little of **Paul's** story and his relationship with the churches of Galatia.

Given that Paul writes to them so freely and openly – and sometimes severely – suggests that they had shared quite a lot together and that there was a significant level of trust between them. Hence Paul can begin today's section of the letter by writing 'You foolish Galatians!' Some translations are rather stronger ... 'You stupid Galatians!' or in the Message translation 'You crazy Galatians!'

Paul appears to be both bewildered and angry with them for going along with some Jewish Christians who demanded that their men be circumcised and that they begin to follow other Jewish laws. In order to change their minds, Paul wheels out a very famous story from Israel's history, the story of Abraham.

Abraham is a towering and significant figure in Judaism, in Islam and in Christianity. For **Judaism** he is the recipient of God's gracious threefold promise of blessing – reputation, land and many descendants. This promise is passed on through



Isaac and then Jacob to his twelve sons who become the nation of Israel.

For **Islam**, God's blessing passes through Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael, who is regarded as the ancestor for the Arab nations.

For **Christians**, Abraham is held up as the **father of faith** – the one who believed the unlikely promises of God and so was blessed.



Paul uses the story of Abraham to push several theological truths, which he hoped would persuade these emerging Christian communities to stick with Paul's understanding of the gospel.

First, Paul argues that God had effectively announced the gospel to Abraham ahead of time by promising that ***all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham***. So not only would God bless the direct descendants of Abraham – the nation of Israel – but also **all** the human family. This included of course the Gentiles – like the new Christians in Galatia – and also ourselves. God's blessing is therefore for **everyone**, not just the Jewish people.

Second, Paul argues that *God's blessing would be for Abraham and his **seed**, **singular***. With a small bit of fancy footwork, Paul suggests that this seed is not Israel – which is the natural reading of the text – but rather the **singular seed of Jesus Christ**, and then through Christ to all who believe in him, namely all Christians. So Paul argues that God's intention all along was to include Christians in the blessing promised to Abraham. So this promise to include Gentiles was not a new thing or a change of mind by God but rather a very ancient promise.

Third, *this blessing comes through **faith** rather than through the Jewish Law*. The key text here is that Abraham **believed** – or **trusted in** – God's promise of many descendants and this was credited to him as righteousness. So the blessing comes through **faith** rather than through following a set of laws. And as Paul points out, the Jewish Law mediated through Moses didn't come for some **400 years after** the promises made to Abraham. Therefore God's blessing comes through faith, not through obedience to the Jewish Law.

Therefore, you foolish and slow-witted Galatians, says Paul, be assured that you are indeed Abraham's **spiritual children** – children of **blessing** – **heirs of God's promises** made to Abraham – because you have put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ – the seed of Abraham – and have received God's promised blessing of the Spirit. You therefore don't need to be circumcised or eat kosher food or anything else – faith alone is enough.

So Paul writes ...


In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:27-29)

Paul's use of the Abraham story is not quite finished ... because it raises some awkward questions ... like ... what exactly was the **purpose** of the Jewish Law if one is blessed without following the Law? ... and **if there is no Law** that we have to follow, **what regulates our behaviour** and our **ethics**? The answers to those questions will come next week as Paul looks at our Christian freedom and what that means.

Now we don't know how well understood Paul's argument was – based as it is on some of the finer points of Israel's history and theology ... but his **purpose** is very much **practical** and **pastoral**.

Paul taught:
God's acceptance through Christ = Enough

The Judaizer's taught:
God's acceptance through Christ + select Mosaic laws = Enough



Men, you don't have to fear having the snip: Your male organ can remain untouched.

Women, you don't have to set up two kitchens and cook kosher like Jewish women do. You can continue to eat your usual diet.

Big sighs of relief all round I imagine.

But how about us? What do **we** take from this section of Paul's letter?

First, **who is called a child of God and who is blessed by God?**

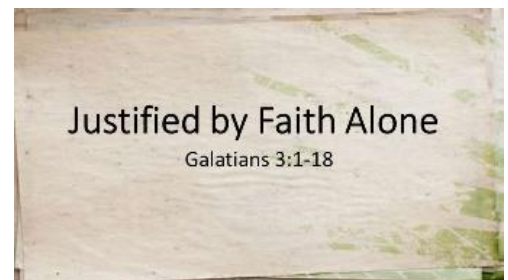
The simple answer is everyone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ.

But we might ask – what about people of other faiths? That's a different question that needs its own careful answer ... perhaps on another occasion.

Second, **does this blessing depend on faith alone – or also on what we do?**

The simple answer is that it depends on faith alone.

Next time Paul will argue that in response to God's grace, we are called to love our neighbour as ourselves and this will guide how we live. More on this next time ...



But the simple and fundamental part of the gospel message that we are blessed through **faith alone** sometimes has unintended consequences.

A Minister was visiting an aged care facility one day and spending time with a lady who could no longer come to church on Sundays. The lady was visibly upset and very anxious that she would not be going to heaven.

The Minister asked her why she was so convinced of all this. Her response was that as she could no longer arrange the flowers in church each week, so God would no longer bless her. For this lady, being loved and blessed by God required her to do the flowers – so it was **faith plus flowers**.

The Minister gently explained to her that God did indeed accept her and would welcome her into heaven ... thanks to Jesus and her faith in Jesus.

The incredible truth that Paul put into simple words is that **all of us** who place our trust in Jesus are now children of God, **all of us** are the spiritual offspring of Abraham, **all of us** are heirs to the promises of God – whether we are Jews or Greeks or Australians – whether we are male or female or express our gender in other ways – whether we are imprisoned like the Murugappan family or whether living with freedom – whether we are rich or poor, young or old – we are all one in Jesus Christ and deeply loved by God.