

Galatians 4.4-7 (unfinished)

'Adoption to sonship'

Arden Marches Group

Sunday, 28 December 2014

Christ-ian

What *is* a Christian?

What would you say if someone asked you that question in the street? In some ways, it is quite a difficult question to answer. Where do you begin?

'Someone who's been baptised'? OK, but what about someone who's been baptised but doesn't darken the church doors until they get married?

So – how about 'someone who goes to church'? If so, how often do you have to go to church to be a Christian? Once a week? Once a month? To the big festivals, like Christmas, Easter and Harvest?

Let's try a different tack – perhaps 'a Christian is someone who does the right thing, and tries to help other people'? OK – but what about all those people who do that, and *don't* go to church?

OK, let's move from what we *do* to what we *believe*. 'A Christian believes in God' – now we're getting there – but what about Muslims? Or Jews, whose Bible is 80% the same as ours?

Perhaps it has something to do with Jesus – but if so, what? That he was born of a virgin? That he performed miracles? That he died and rose again? That he ascended to the Father? Or all of the above, like in the creeds?

Maybe it is more to do with what God does to *us*, rather than something *we* believe.

But by the time you've run through all those things in your head, the person who asked has probably lost interest, and wandered off because of the glazed expression on your face.

So what should you say?

Adoption

One of the best books I have ever read, is called *Knowing God* by JI Packer, who is a British-born Canadian theologian and pastor. He says this about the Christian faith:

You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.

J.I. Packer, Knowing God, ??

For Packer, like Paul (as we are about to discover), the true heart of Christianity is not in articles of faith, or good and kind behaviour, but in a relationship: God as our Father and us as his children.

And that is what Paul is talking about in those short verses we heard, from Galatians. They sum up, rather neatly I have to say, what the Christian faith is all about.

'That we might receive'

He begins (4): **when the set time had fully come**. This was no whim, or spur-of-the-moment decision. God did not send his one and only Son, in the same way that we might decide which pair of socks to wear in the morning.

No: it was *part of God's plan all along*. Things don't happen to God unexpectedly or by accident. He is in ultimate control of history, he is above, beyond *and yet within* it, moving it, shaping it.

So, when the time was perfect (4), **God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.** The New Testament is very clear on this: Jesus was truly one of us. He wasn't pretending, like the Greek gods who would take on human form to trick people. Jesus was 100% human being. He had a mum, and he had to obey the law, just like you and me. He even had to pay his taxes! But why? Paul continues (5): **to redeem those under the law.** Jesus came to set us free, to pay the redemption-price so we would no longer be slaves to our sin. And that is a wonderful truth! Because of Jesus we are freed and put right with God, instead of deserving punishment. If you are a Christian, you are completely and fully forgiven.

And a lot of the time, we Christians stop there, as if that's all there is. Don't get me wrong, forgiveness is great, but it does go hand-in-hand with my failure, with my *need* for that forgiveness. It's so common for Christians to feel tremendous guilt – after all, we are those who know that our sins are *so* bad, Jesus had to die on the cross to pay the price for them.

But that's sad – and actually downright wrong – because Paul doesn't stop there. So neither should we.

When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, *that we might receive adoption to sonship.*

Galatians 4.4-5 (NIV), emphasis added

Jesus redeemed us *so that* we might adopted into God's families, adopted **to sonship**. Paul doesn't mean we will all be boys, but that we have all the rights and privileges of the male heir

You see, Prince William and Prince Harry are, on the one hand, exactly the same. They are both sons of Prince Charles, they are both princes. But on the other hand, they couldn't be more different. Prince William will, one day, be king. Harry will not – barring a tragedy. They are both sons, but only *one* is an *heir*.

And yet, with God, and through Jesus,