

## THE GIFT OF CHRIST

Acts 15:1-21

Hebrews 10:19-31

When I studied at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, one of the lecturers was the inspirational Larry Wellborn. Larry (it was America, we were on first name terms with all the faculty!) was not so very much older than me - indeed he would be younger than some of the students - but he was a walking library of New Testament scholarship. Challengingly, he assumed that all his students had read as widely as he had himself, though charmingly he never commented negatively when we had to say we hadn't heard of this or that argument by no and so. Instead he would launch into a full and lucid explanation of whatever it was. You left his lectures breathless and inspired to go out and read and work and discover. All teachers should be like that. However the year I graduated was the last the Larry was to lecture in that college. He had to find another position. Why? Not for any moral reason, nor because his teaching was sub-standard. It was because in all the joy of teaching, he had never quite got around to finishing his PHD. And it was Seminary policy that all their permanent staff should be suitably qualified, which meant having the right to call themselves, Doctor. I recently looked him up on the internet and found that he is lecturing at a Methodist college, and now has the right to call himself Doctor. But finishing his PHD would not have made Larry a better teacher; that wasn't the point at issue. At that time he didn't have the qualifying letters which the seminary council had accepted as the standard for belonging.

In our reading this morning we are faced squarely with the question of qualification. What qualification do we need to have to be a proper Christian?

The men who came to Antioch from Jerusalem, said that the proper qualification was to be circumcised: an external mark on the body, which should show the world who you worshipped. Some Christians who were Pharisees, in Jerusalem, said that circumcision and keeping the law were what was required if you were to be a proper Christian.

We read how Peter and James (that's Jesus' brother James: James the apostle had been executed, remember) soon put a stop to that sort of idea. But I wonder, what do we make a qualification? Do we make it membership of a denomination: if you aren't one of us you're not a real Christian? Are we Church of Scotland first and Christian second, in the same way that some of these early Christians were Jewish first? Or do we put matters of life-style up there as a qualifying test: just as the Pharisees said the Law must be kept? Or is it a matter of theology? Do we say, or imply, that you can't really be a Christian if you don't understand the life and work of Jesus in the same way that I do?

In verse 11, which is central to this whole story, even to the whole story of Acts, Peter makes clear what is essential. He says we need the grace, or the gift, of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is all.

That is all, just the gift of Christ. Not external marks - be it circumcision, or baptism; not a holy life-style - though that may and ought to follow from accepting and possessing the gift of Christ; not denomination and nuances of interpretation; not even Scripture. In this account of the first big row in the church, and how it was settled, you notice that Paul and Barnabas tell the gathered Christians what they have seen God do, then there is debate, of which we are not given the content. No doubt it would be along

the lines of “But would God do this, which is treating Gentiles like the chosen Jewish people? Would God give his Spirit to those who don’t keep the Mosaic law?” And then there is Peter’s testimony, which says “There’s no point in saying would God do this when we have seen that he does and he has.” He then points out that the very reason that they had all become followers of Jesus was because they found keeping the Law a burden too great to bear, so why ask of others what they couldn’t do themselves?

In all of this it is only after hearing what God is doing that James invokes Scripture. How wise he is. The early church is not looking first at Scripture to understand what God at work should look like. They don’t say “The Bible says this, so this is what I expect to find, the way I expect God to work.” When people do that - and they do - they run into problems, because the world often isn’t the way that their reading of Scripture tells them it should be. And so they lay themselves open to ridicule and to the charge of not living in the real world. Moreover it is very limiting to God to have our interpretations of Scripture dictate how we will see him at work. I wonder how often we have missed seeing God’s hand in the world or in our lives because of our expectations?

I heard a comic at the Edinburgh Fringe interviewed on the radio last Sunday. His show is made up of what you might call Biblical jokes - not offensive, and some very funny. But he himself is not a believer. He says he is ready to believe if God will just come and zap him; but it was obvious from his conversation that he would only recognise God coming if he had an experience comparable to St. Paul on the road to Damascus. He has read Scripture (for his show) and he has decided how God should work.

But James hears how God has been at work, and he is reminded of a Scripture: one which he might never have thought as being fulfilled in such a way before. In fact it is a text that reads differently in the Hebrew than in the Greek - which James quotes - and which James would have grown up being told referred to the Jewish nation overcoming the Gentile peoples. But now he hears of how God is at work, that Scripture sings in a whole new key to James, and he can see in it corroboration of what Peter and Paul have already experienced.

It all seems very obvious to us now, but that’s because the decision of the early church - that the gift of Christ is central is one which has come down to us as a given. But it wasn’t a given then. It was a real and thorny problem, and one which didn’t go away as soon as the judgement was reached. Luke would like to give us the impression that James spoke and the matter was settled, but Paul’s letters show us that those who wanted to be Jews first caused the argument to rumble on for a few years yet. That is human nature and that tendency didn’t die out with the early church! (Think ordination of women.)

But what was decided, and what we hold to, is that what is needed to be saved is the gift or grace of the Lord Jesus.

Sing: 358 The great love of God is revealed in the Son

Peter says “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Another translation reads: “Through the gift that is the Lord Jesus we are believing in order to be saved.”

Peter - and indeed the people who wanted to add on the Law and circumcision - talked about salvation, about being saved. The church has often used such language - to

such an extent that sometimes we may be a little embarrassed by it. But we do well to remember what familiarity with the love of God might make us forget: that, as the writer to the Hebrews said “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” God is not a teddy bear, to hug when things get bad. He is not a tame lion, robbed of all power. If we forget the need to be saved, which is the need to be saved from what we have made of ourselves which hurts and angers God, then we stop believing in a God of power and might, of holiness and justice.

We need to be saved, to be kept safe. And these words of Peter remind us that it is a process. I recall the story of the bishop sitting in an old fashioned train compartment with a little girl opposite him. The little girl was fresh from an evangelistic meeting and determined to do her bit. Fixing the bishop with the unflinching glare of youth she asked: “Are you saved?”

The Bishop took no offence. “Little girl,” he said, “I am saved, I am being saved and on the last day I confidently hope that in Jesus I will be saved.”

Saved, by Christ’s action in the past, his saving death for us on Calvary. Being saved, being kept safe, being made more like him, becoming what God intends. And saved in the future, at the end of time, at the judgement seat, when the gift of Christ is all we need to be proclaimed not guilty.

The word that is translated both grace and gift is Charis (χαρις), the word which is at the root of our Charismatic - referring to God’s undeserved gifts to us. That sense of gift is behind our word grace in any case. When I was in Sunday School I learned a useful way of remembering what the word grace means it was this: God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. God’s grace to us is his undeserved, extreme favour.

A week ago one of our cats was tragically killed on the busy A7. No more cats for us - the road is too busy. But we still have one cat, Misha. Now Misha is a big bruiser of a cat, a great hunter, a street-wise gentleman. Stubs who was killed was half his size, and was a real softy, liking nothing better than a good petting session. Nevertheless watching Misha in the last week I have realised that Stubs was Misha’s protection and in a way his saviour. Stubs it was who would yowl and growl at neighbouring cats, protecting his territory from all comers. As soon as he was killed Misha’s days changed radically. Now instead of sleeping his morning away, or frolicking after rabbits in the field, he patrols the manse garden, and then sit for hours at a time staring into the neighbours garden, watching for the advent of Cut-throat Jake. Misha has learned in reverse what it meant to have a saviour. It meant freedom from care, it meant that he was never unprotected. It meant that he was never alone, and could relax.

Christ, who saves us, keeps our boundaries; following him keeps us within the Kingdom of God.. Christ who saves us patrols to alert us of dangers to our souls; following him helps us grow in godliness. Christ who saves us protects us from judgement: following him means that he gives us God’s riches, gives us the freehold of heaven.

All the Gentiles were urged to do was to accept the gift of Christ, accept the grace - God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense. This was to be central to all who are Christians and it still is. God’s grace in our life, the gift of Christ in us is the hub from which all else in life should flow: in praise and prayer and devotion; in morality - which is just showing

our gratitude by living as God would want; in the use of time and money; in the way we conduct ourselves with friends or stranger. The grace of Christ is the hub of it all. There is no other qualification needed to gain God's salvation.