

Life of Paul

Philippians 3:2-6

2 Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:

5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Luke 6:6-11

6 On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. 7 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. 8 But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there.

9 Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

10 He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. 11 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Week 1

This is the first of a 3 parter - the next is next week, the final part is Sept 7th! - that's some summer cliffhanger!

We've done about Paul in Soul Food - about whether he was inclusive, and we've done in Messy Church - shipwreck and missionary journeys, so I've been thinking about Paul a lot more than usual and I thought - lets tell people about Paul!

So this week we're looking at his faith and how he changes.

Next week we're looking at his missionary journeys, what he preached and how.

And then in Sept thought we'd look at his personal life - what he went through and his character.

But Paul - wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. So if the New Testament is 27 books, Paul wrote 13 of them!

Some critics say it's Paul that founded Christianity, he's the one who started all the churches etc. But clearly Christianity was already existing before Paul converted - yes he popularised it and spread it, and like all the early church were working on doctrine and theology. But Jesus is the one foundation.

Some critics say that Paul doesn't really quote the gospels or sayings of Jesus. But in a time when paper is in short supply and expensive, and if you're already writing to people who know that stuff, there would be no need. Most people's memories were better then, many Jews had memorised the whole of the first 5 books of the Law, and all 150 psalms. They didn't have passwords to remember, TV, or other books - they counted their sheep but the world was less distracting. So the stories and words of Jesus were passed on orally - by mouth, my word of mouth. And people would remember them. Actually it's not hard to remember them - most of you could do the story of the good Samaritan right now! So Paul is not going to say - as Jesus said.. he doesn't need to. And nothing he says contradicts with anything Jesus says.

So.. Paul - you writer, you marketing man, you thinker, you action hero - who are you?

Well - we've heard in Philippians - he was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Lets just unpick that for a moment.

To be circumcised on the 8th day - that is what is required in Leviticus (8:3) - its pretty strict obedience to the law.

He is of the people of Israel - not a gentile

He knows his tribe. Tribe of Benjamin

When the ten northern tribes had been scattered by the Assyrians, Benjamin voluntarily relocated and joined Judah.

Jerusalem, the beloved capitol city, was built on land from the tribe of Benjamin.

It was also the tribe that the two sons of Rachel, Isaac's beloved wife, came from.

Named Saul - after a Jewish King.

Paul was very Jewish - Hebrew of Hebrews

He is not just going through teh motions, or a cultural Jew as we might say today - he believed it, he lived it he loved it.

a Pharisee;

Pharisees were a strange mix its hard for us to get hold of today.

In one sense they were like the conservative party as compared to labour - by which I mean, they had a worldview, an ideology, and a vision for how the country and community worked - which was different to teh sadducees vision or others. In those days, in those parts - people had a vision of God and how God wanted the country to be run - it was a theocracy, much like some Islamic states claim to be or want to be. I guess when some people think of England as a "christian nation" they're thinking of that - but in that case you've got to imagine the vicars also being the judges in teh law court, and the MPs' and the policeman.

If a Pharisee caught you breaking teh law, there would be consequences - as we heard in our reading about the man with the withered hand in the synagogue - so they were police, judge and jury - and yet no-one had elected them, they had just amassed power. There were some who were more involved in the temple in Jerusalem, some who did more theology. But you can see we have no corresponding role in society.

In some ways they take on teh role of the Levitical priests or Moses in the Old Testament. In America they have strict division between state and religion, and here we are enmeshed by the established church, but neither of those would be what it feels like to have a religious law enforced by a civil court, or a civil law ruled on by religion. The closest I can get is during Oliver Cromwell's reign - Christmas was banned, and one of my predecessors in my last parish was *Thomas Lawrence, Herbert's successor*, was accused of allowing skittles, bowling and dancing there on Sundays.

But Pharisees were elite, educated and powerful. All the way to the top.

And Paul was one of them. He persecuted the followers of Jesus becuase they were heretical, illegal, wrong. Against God's will.

He also says he lived a life in full obedience to the law. - "as for righteousness based on the law, faultless."

There are 365 laws in the Torah - and it is hard to keep them in the modern world. But I think Paul was able - to build a tabernacle for he feast of tabernacles, to avoid split fibres, certain foods, dead bodes and women menstruating.

He doesn't say he is without sin - he often talks about struggling with it. *Sin is not the same thing as not keeping the law.*

But he offered the proper sacrifices at the proper times, he studied Torah, he lived by all the purity laws, and he forced those purity laws on others.

2 other details about Paul - he was born a Roman Citizen, which must have been quite rare, and gave him even more power and privilege. Rome occupied most of the known world - from Syria to Hadrian's Wall - a super-super power. If you were one of them, you were protected, you could travel freely - it was a lovely place. If you were one of the others, the occupied people - well. Don't expect fair treatment - think of Asterix and Obelix and the Gauls!

The other bit is that he was under the Rabbi Gamaliel. We sometimes hear of Jesus being called a rabbi, and we heard today about the chief rabbi. It means teacher, but its also a specific role within Judaism. You'd have to be at least 30, and have studied under another Rabbi - each Rabbi had their group of disciples, who applied to join their rabbinical school - because they liked what rabbi so and so said. And they'd be expected to copy the rabbi - to live like them, to agree with what they taught - "walking in the dust of the rabbi" refers to the close relationship between a disciple and their teacher in Jewish tradition.

And Gamaliel - was one of the hight priests of Jerusalem - like a minister of state.

If I put this in current terms - Paul was born white, to a family mentioned in Who's who, went to Eton or Marlborough or Winchester, then onto to Oxford or Cambridge to study law. He is now working in the secretary of state's office, and runs for MP next year.

That's how much Paul is enmeshed in the system.

And then he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and his life turns upside down.
His world changes - one minute he's on the road to wealth, high office, a religion he knows and understands. In a moment that's all gone.

Suddenly he's one of them - the rebels, the heretics. He famously in Philippians says he would give up all his advantage, count it as loss, as rubbish, compared to knowing Christ.

This is the man who is arrested, flogged, publicly humiliated, many times, and ultimately put to death by the empire for spreading teh gospel of Jesus.

He will spend the rest of his life on the road, hunted, persecuted, and die penniless and alone in the arena in Rome, like a common criminal.

Some people say he gave up his name - to become Paul. That's not really true, you can see in Acts he's still called Saul when he's amongst his Jewish friends,

Acts 13:2, "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" - 11 more times!

Its just that Paul is easier for the Gentiles to hear. Its part of when in Rome, do as the Romans. Paul said - to teh jews I become jewish, to the romans ..

1 Corinthians 9:20-22

20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

Ok - so we've got this -
He was the best Jew
Then he found Christ.

What changed and what stayed the same?

From the middle ages at least, up until maybe 50 years ago the church would have said that Paul rejected his Jewish roots when he became Christian.

Teh story would be that Judaism was bad, and Christianity was good.

That Judaism was full of all these rules, laws, that were impossible to keep, irrelevant, it was a rules based religion - a way of earning your way into heaven. If you were good enough, and kept

them all, then you could see God, otherwise you'd have to keep sacrificing pigeons etc and it was a terrible system.

And you can see how we can look at the verses about Jesus healing a man in the synagogue - sounds very much like Judaism was all about keeping rules, and that Jesus was bringing people back to the spirit of the law, rather than the letter.

Then the story goes that Paul - converted by Jesus - sees that its faith that matters, not works. Belief in Jesus is all that counts.

Many verses to illustrate this.

But then in the 1970's theologians changed. For one thing they talked to real life Jews, not their imaginary ones in their head. They said it had never been about earning your way into heaven. That the old testament is all about grace - god's underserved goodness, that chose Abraham, that sent Moses, that gave them the land of Israel.

That the rules were about identifying a people, a way of people showing they belong, of defining them. The rules, the law, were a gift of God to help people remember God and show to themselves they were living right. - like Football fans wearing scarves or shirts - you don't have to, but you want to - to belong.

So in our synagogue example its not that Jesus commits a sin or breaks a law by doing work on teh sabbath, its that the Pharisees were using God's command to define laws more strictly - and they are very strict about what 'work' is - currently there are 39 categories, Including:

1. Carrying
2. Burning
3. Extinguishing
4. Finishing
5. Writing
6. Erasing
7. Cooking
8. Washing
9. Sewing
10. Tearing
11. Knotting
12. Untying
13. Shaping
14. Plowing
15. Planting
16. Reaping
17. Harvesting
18. Threshing
19. Winnowing
20. Selecting
21. Sifting
22. Grinding
23. Kneading
24. Combing
25. Spinning
26. Dyeing
27. Chain-stitching
28. Warping
29. Weaving
30. Unraveling
31. Building
32. Demolishing
33. Trapping
34. Shearing

35. Slaughtering
36. Skinning
37. Tanning
38. Smoothing
39. Marking

which are then detailed - to define precisely what that is.

So that they can guide people, police people - so all the community can live in a peaceable way..

And .. don't forget in this instance, they're actually following Jesus around to find a way to catch him

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Perhaps we can come back to this point if its hard to grasp..

Judaism wasn't legalistic:

NPP scholars argue that first-century Judaism was not a system of works-righteousness, but rather a covenantal religion where one enters God's people by grace and remains through obedience.

"Works of the law" as boundary markers:

The "works of the law" that Paul critiques, according to NPP, are not about earning salvation but about Jewish identity markers like circumcision, Sabbath observance, and dietary laws.

Paul's concern:

NPP suggests Paul's primary concern was not salvation from a legalistic system, but rather the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian covenant without requiring them to become Jewish proselytes.

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In fact we see that Paul / Saul nowhere contradicts the old testament, and even though he is accused of telling people to abandon Moses and the Law, he doesn't. He says Jews should keep the law, because that's who they are, but Gentiles don't need to keep the law, because that's not who they are.

Paul does not convert from Judaism to Christianity - he never leaves his jewish roots - which he's really proud of and are a part of him.

- he still believes in one god, in the old testament, its just that now he also believes that Jesus is the promised and waited for messiah, and that God wants all people to know him, not just the jews. The messiah wasn't just coming to save the Jews - but all people. The Messiah wasn't going to be an earthly king like David with a human army - he was going to be the eternal king of kings of a kingdom of heaven - which was going to start on earth.

Paul's faith just went 3D technicolour - surround sound.

His faith changed - God didn't change - but Paul got a better glimpse, had a closer walk.

And so Paul changed the way he presented his message to suit who he was talking to - to the Jews he would give long explanations of the Law, Moses, and draw connections of Jesus with Psalms and Isaiah.

For the Gentiles, he talked about nature, or gods they already worshipped, he talked about the things that were bad in the society adn community which would be different when they walked with Jesus.

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Next week we'll hear about his missionary journeys and how he brought christianity to the masses and the heart of the Roman Empire.