

From Bondage to Joy
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
(From the Epistle: Galatians 4:21-

*4:21. Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? 22. For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. 23. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. 24. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. 25. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. 26. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. 27. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. 28. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. **29. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.** 30. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. 31. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.*

Paul makes use of a very well known tale from the Old Testament to illustrate a vital point for the Galatian readers of his letter. His purpose is to help his audience to understand why they have become victims to a party of legalists who are bent upon stealing their Christian liberty, and placing them back under the yoke of the Old Testament law. The apostle is desperate to rescue them from this trap that so many believers have fallen into throughout the history of the Church.

Genesis chapters 16 and 21 give the details. Abraham had been promised an heir, but the fulfillment was a long time coming. Meanwhile, Sarah, his wife, was desperate to have children, and gave her maid Hagar to Abraham to bear his child that Sarah would adopt as her own. The plan, of course, backfired, and brought sadness and division to the family. Hagar's son Ishmael, the result of the union, later became a rival to Sarah's son Isaac whom she bore to Abraham several years later. Isaac is the sole heir to Abraham's blessing that God had solemnly promised to grant him. During a great feast held in honor of Isaac's weaning, the older Ishmael makes fun of Isaac, an act of contemptuous disrespect that will cost both him and his mother their place in the family.

St. Paul uses this incident to contrast two covenants that mark the history of Israel. One of them, given by God on Mt Sinai to Moses, is the Old Covenant of the Law. It promises blessing from God based upon obedience to His commandments. Its success is dependent upon performance: observance of the Law brings blessing; rejection of it brings a curse. The history of Israel chronicled in the Bible graphically presents the result: the Law is set aside, abrogated, violated, and abandoned, over and over again, resulting in the bitterest of consequences, even banishment from the Promised Land. Though judgment for sin invariably occurs, the persistent, in-

explicable, tender, gracious mercy of God is always evoked. This is not by any means or on any level a testimony to Israel's charm or merit or deservingness, but solely and completely to the heart and character of the God who has adopted them in fatherly love. All of this is a great overture to an everlasting new covenant that God has intended to bring forth from eternity past, a contract, if you will, that God will enter into with man, where God Himself will assume the penalty and burden and consequence of man's collective sin. The gap that man's sin unfailingly creates in his efforts to worship God, even his best efforts based upon God's own Law, will be finally and irrevocably closed. Here man's part is reduced to mere acceptance, and no more. The impossible burden of perfect obedience to holy precepts is forever lifted. This is the great and overwhelming joy of the Christian. It is freedom. It is liberty. It is great Good News.

But the proud legalist, the morose, self-loving, holier-than-thou purist, who despises the love and mercy of God by presuming that he can add to it through his own self-righteous performance of the Law, will have no part in such a place of simple acceptance. It is too easy. Way beneath his dignity and ability. It allows him no place for demonstrating pride of performance. It places all men, himself included, very democratically at the same low, undeserving level. And so, what does he do? He goes after those who have learned the secret of embracing this great and glorious free gift, and of daring to live it to the full. "No, no!", cries the resentful and envious law-practitioner, "You cannot possibly claim to please God in this fashion! You must join me in my miserable, compulsive, duty-bound observance of the Law. And *I* will tell you whether you are successful or not. *I* will judge your progress. You cannot possibly succeed without my constant guidance and supervision!"

This is the *Jerusalem in bondage with her children* that the apostle so poignantly describes in today's text. Like Hagar and Ishmael, she is man's idea --not God's-- of how to serve God. She is in constant conflict with the true Jerusalem, that *Jerusalem which... above is free, which is the mother of us all*.

It is the place of true believers to constantly protect the simplicity and straightforwardness of the Gospel against such a spirit. Alas, it is a temptation to all of us to easily give up the liberty which Christ has so graciously brought us. Why? Because true liberty brings *responsibility*! It compels maturity, and right-headedness. It commands us to receive others with Christian charity and openheartedness that refuses to condemn and reject others because their performance is not as stellar as we fancy ours to be. It forces us to *walk in the Spirit that ye... not fulfill the lusts of the flesh*(Gal. 5:16), a life of real, true, spiritual adulthood. It is the place of full-orbed Christians who have accepted the responsibilities and constraints of such a life. It is not a place for spiritual toddlers who cannot function outside the convenient slats of their Law-bound playpens!

We are easy prey to legalism and to legalists. Again, why? Because we all know, if our consciences are the least bit tender, that we are poor performers of God's will and ways. We are acutely conscious of our shortcomings and failures when it comes to holiness and godliness. We know we deserve the judgment of "guilty" with any and all penalties that might follow. When someone comes along, chains in hand, pointing us to a little cage reserved just for us, and says soothingly and convincingly, "Look, I'll take all of this uncertainty from you, once and for all. Here's what you need to do: Just "wear your hair just so"; "say three Hail Marys before you go to bed"; "don't watch any movies"; "never drink any wine or beer"; "don't dare miss a Sunday of church"; "don't ever read books by *that* man, or listen to any sermons by *that* preacher"; "do absolutely everything your husband tells you to do"; "submit to me at all times, because I'm your minister"; "if you have any questions, always come to me..."! On and on goes the list.

What is the very next verse in Galatians that once upon a time was actually included as a part of today's Epistle?: *Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage* (5:1).

On this Refreshment Sunday in mid-Lent, this "Joyful Sunday", let us remind ourselves of the true nature of this New Covenant we have received, one which fills us with *joy unspeakable and full of glory* (1 Peter 1:8). Joy is in short supply these days. Let us hold on to ours more tightly than ever before.

Let us pray:

Lord, pour into the hearts of Thy servants that joy of the righteous which is in Thee; that the praise of Thee, which becometh well the upright, may purge out all the unholiness from our minds, through Thy mercy, and Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(from *Ancient Collects and Other Prayers*, p. 90)