

GALATIANS 2:15-21
 FORGIVENESS!

What excites you about life? Is there something in life that sets your pulse racing? Something that you really look forward to? Something that's just so good, so special, that you're excited by it? It could be so many things that I'm not even going to begin to make suggestions! It will be different for each one of us. It's a dangerous question, because the answers might be unlikely; it is also dangerous because I hope there is something, otherwise our view of life is bleak and a bit of a drudge. Yet, for many people that's what they get caught up in, a cycle of life where nothing special happens and nothing exciting happens; so we just survive life.

What excites you about Church? What excites you about being here today? As someone who has been coming here, perhaps for years and years, regularly week after week, what excites you about being here today? Or perhaps you're here for the first time and are not sure how it will be, so is there something that excites you about being in a new church for the first time and have been looking forward to being here since you decided that you'd come. It is so easy to be caught up in the other; I read this other day: "In the beginning when we got together we used to talk about something that was good for our own souls and we went up and up and ascended even to heaven. But now we get together and spend our time in criticising everything and we drag one another down into the abyss." What excites you about Church?

What excites you about Jesus? One evening Jesus was at dinner with one of the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisee. They were reclining at the table and in those days houses were open to the street and people could wander in to watch what was going on. A woman came in to the house while they were eating and carrying a jar of perfume; it was made of alabaster and so she broke it easily. She was crying and her tears began to wet Jesus' feet and she wiped them away with her hair and then broke the bottle of perfume and poured it over Jesus' feet. This bottle represented her life savings, so here was an extravagant gift of love to Jesus. It was too much for the Pharisee because this woman had a chequered past, a sinful life! He protested to Jesus that Jesus was letting this woman do these extravagant things. But Jesus knew what the woman was like, He knew everything about her: "*therefore I...*" (Luke 7:47f) She was full of contrition for her past, but also full of gratitude to Jesus, full of faith, humility, and generosity because of what Jesus had done for her. Her tears are tears of joy; she is glad to be in the presence of the One who had changed her life forever.

We need to get this the right way round: "*I tell...*" (v47) Her love, her generosity, and her faith were a response to being forgiven, there were evidence of her forgiveness. She did these things to Jesus because He had already forgiven her sins and she came full of gratitude and love because of what He had already done. She did not do this, emphatically not do this, to persuade Jesus to forgive her. She was already forgiven and her sheer joy at having her life put right made her come with this extravagant gift of perfume for the One who had changed her life. She is excited by Jesus because He had forgiven her. Her chequered past is gone, wiped out, forgotten, forgiven and she is a new woman; her life is changed forever and she wants to show Jesus just how much He means to her.

In Galatians 2, Paul gives this some shape so that it moves from just being true of one woman in a Bible story, to being true for all of us, in every generation; it moves from being one person excited by faith, changed by Jesus, to show how this can be true for all of us and how the power and grace of Jesus can touch every life. The reality is that the gospel is good news for everyone; it is not just for 'religious people'

whoever they are, but it is good news for everyone; no matter who we are, Jesus changes lives; anyone who comes into contact with Jesus finds that life will never be the same again and that is for our good. Here Paul shows us what that means and helps us understand what Jesus does for us; he is excited by it.

The key word in this is 'justified'; it is an old word, not a word that we use much today except in your word-processing package on your PC; you have the option to 'justify' the print which means having it square to both edges of the paper. This year is the 450th anniversary of the reformation in Scotland and one of the key themes of the Reformation was the re-discovery of this notion of "justification by faith"; Martin Luther suggested that it was so important that "This is the truth of the gospel... we should beat it into their heads continually." It is a word that comes from the law courts and is the opposite of condemning someone. To condemn is to declare that someone is guilty of their crimes as charged; to justify is to declare that someone is innocent of all charges. Conscience and experience tell us that we have made mistakes and got things wrong and God won't be pleased with us; the gospel tells us that all of this is sorted because of Jesus and we are forgiven, justified, innocent before God.

"A man..." (v16) There are three levels at which this works:

1. "**a man...**" (v16a) There is nobody in particular in mind here, it is deliberately vague. It is just a person, a man, a woman, any man, any woman and it becomes a general principle. This man or woman does not find favour with God by what they do, but through faith in Jesus. This is the principle that lies behind the whole gospel, the whole good news that the Church has preached from the beginning and still preaches: we are not justified by our own activities or our own goodness, but by Jesus and all that He has done for us.

2. "**so we...**" (v16b) now it becomes personal; we have proved this to be true by our own experience of faith and life. 'We know it; we have discovered this for ourselves; we have put our faith in Jesus and He has done for us what the gospel said He would; we are justified by faith'. You may not feel qualified to give any kind of theological explanation of what God has done for us in Jesus, but often our personal story is a powerful witness.

3. "**by observing...**" (v16c) Here is the universal reality. The principle and our personal example lead Paul to say that the gospel is for everyone and everyone comes to God in the same way. Whoever we are, whatever our background, whether we've grown up in the Church or come to it totally new, no matter where we come from, we all come to God through Jesus and find our salvation through faith in Jesus.

I find this gloriously exciting. This goes right to the root of who we are as human beings and as Christians. This is about what makes us the people that we are, about what makes life tick. It is not about getting some kind of religious life in correct order by ticking the right boxes, but about being the right kind of people in a relationship with living God. The gospel tells us that what makes us tick, what gives us the best grounding, the best hope, our best security is through faith in Jesus. It is not about our achievements, because for all we achieve, there are still failures; it is not about being perfect people, because we can't do that either; it is not about having the right postcode because the gospel treats every postcode in the same way so there is no postcode lottery in the gospel. So we can say to everyone, to the whole world, that forgiveness is God's habit and we are justified in God's eyes through faith in Jesus.

"I have..." (v20) At the heart of all of this stands the colossal figure of Jesus. This is another, slightly complicated, way of describing Paul's personal experience of life and faith, but the heart of it, the centre of it, is Jesus Christ. "*I live...*" (v20b) There are three things about Jesus: first, He is God's Son and that has been the Church's witness from the very beginning; it is not enough to speak of Jesus as a great

teacher, or someone with good moral standards; to get Jesus right we have to speak of Him as the Son of God come into the world to be our saviour. Secondly, He loved the world, me: the amazing thing when we consider the world into which Jesus came, the world in which we live and the kind of people we are. Our world is not perfect, is full of all kinds of wrong things; people have not loved God perfectly, or even at all at times; we have made mistakes; yet Jesus loved us, and has loved our world. Thirdly, He gave Himself for me: the centre of Jesus' story is the cross; every gospel writer spends more time on the last week in Jesus' life than on any other part; the cross and the resurrection are the centre of that story, the key to understanding the whole story; He gave Himself, He gave His life, He died on the cross to be the Saviour.

This changes everything. This changes life so much that Paul could speak of it as dying and rising again, he has died to the old way of life and is alive to Christ and to faith. Life is never the same again. This changes our relationship with God: now He is our Father and Friend and not someone of whom we need to be afraid or from whom need to keep our distance. It changes relationship with other Christians: Christ has done the same thing to both of us, so we share faith, we share all kinds of other things in common, things greater than those that drive us apart. This changes our relationship with ourselves; we see ourselves in a different way, as people loved by God, people whom Jesus loves so much that He is willing to give His life, people who are forgiven, blessed and no longer needing to drive ourselves on to achieve enough to justify ourselves, and are free to accept and enjoy the forgiveness that God gives in Christ.

This excites me. This makes me who I am; this makes me what I am. So many people want to write off the Church as irrelevant to the world we live in, to 21st century people in the UK, but the Church has got the most exciting good news in the world to share with people; our crime is that so often we make it dull! So many people tell us that the Church is on the way out, yet when we tell the stories of Jesus, people are fascinated by Him; when we deal with big issues of faith and life people are captivated by the gospel and come to believe. So let me ask you again and you can take this question home with you and think about it for yourself: what excites you about Church? What excites you about Jesus? What excites you about faith? I hope and pray that something does. Here are two stories today of people who were excited by Jesus, captivated by Him and it changed their lives: a woman with a dubious past who discovered that God forgives; a man brought up steeped in religion who discovered that Jesus loved him as he is and gave His life for him and that God blessed him because of Jesus. The woman was so excited that she poured her life-savings' perfume all over Jesus; Paul was so excited that he spent his life telling the world this good news. What excites you?