

**Faith and Life Convention**

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**DO WE STILL NEED ST PAUL?**

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**Welcome**

- Our context right now
- Paul's life and ministry
- The "coherent" and the "contingent"
- What's at the heart of it for him?
- Can we learn from that today?
- Resources
- Conversation

**Our context right not**

- Our world
- Our churches
- Ourselves
- Our narratives

*Our world*

- We live in a time of great anxiety about the well-being of our planet – a time of anxiety about the next generation and how it will be for them.
- The political world is undergoing a time of destabilisation, unknown, at least in Europe, since the post-war consensus. Marked social divisions create contexts in which many will be unhappy with the final outcomes.
- The potential for manipulation by malign forces is greater than ever before and often the ordinary person feels paralysed, unable to grasp what is going on and, even more so, helpless to oppose it.
- The huge expansion (invasion?) of the social media means we are more aware of our world and of each other but not necessarily less on our own or less lonely.
- In the words of Plato, we need and long for truth and expertise in our leaders, both political and ecclesiastical. Often, such reasonable expectations are not met but rather set aside or even dismissed, sometimes blatantly and without apology.

*Our Churches*

- The mainline churches are in decline. Something happened some four or five decades ago which effectively disabled the handing on of the faith. The cultural shell has remained (a surprise, really), but it is increasingly obvious that it is indeed a fragile shell.
- It is not evident to our contemporaries that the Christian tradition is equipped to respond to current spiritual needs.
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*Ourselves*

- Coming generations are no longer born into a received and acknowledged system of meaning, with rituals and symbols, but each person, each human unit, has to create their own sense of what it means to be human. This can be seen as a liberation and as a burden. It is certainly not easy.
- In an age of (very) welcome tolerance, this lack of received meaning can lead to a sense that there is no general meaning at all, nothing is true in itself but only true for me or for us.
- At the same time, live in a time of great generosity of spirit, as can be seen when appeals go out for causes.
- The increased interest in such practices meditation, mindfulness, yoga, tells us that people are searching, looking for a "still point at the turning of the world" (TS Eliot).
- The hungers of the human heart have not been stilled by our culture of distraction, constant news and instant communication. St Augustine was right: our hearts are restless.
- It is vital to keep an eye on social rituals. When the fundamental rituals change – typically associated with birth, puberty, marriage and death – then some very deep change is taking place. We may not be aware of this in the middle of it.

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- It is vital to keep an eye on the poets and the musicians. These are the prophetic voices of our day and very often they express what is happening long before a conscious awareness or interpretation is possible.

### *Our narratives*

- The small world of Christian origins
- The breath-taking world of contemporary cosmology

### **Paul's life and ministry**

- Birth c. 6 bce
- Encounter with Christ: c. 33-35
- Local evangelist: c. 36-c. 45
- Travelling apostle: c. 49-64/7
  
- First missionary journey: Acts 13:4-14:26 (c. 46-48)
- Second missionary journey: Acts 15:40-18:22 (c. 49-52)
- Third missionary journey: Acts 18:22-21:15 (c. 52-57)
- Journey to Rome: Acts 27:1-28:16 (c. 59-60)
- Death: Acts of Paul and Thecla (c. 64-67)

### **Coherent and contingent**

- When we talk we all assume a worldview / a larger background ("Irish are rude!")
- Coherent = the big picture, present in all the letters, sometimes explicit
- Contingent = the local issue(s) at stake, the motivation for the letter
- The "big picture" gives us the very heart of Paul's teaching.
- The local issues keep the things very grounded and practical.

### **What's at the heart of it?**

- The "big bang" of Paul's encounter with the Risen Christ
- Why did Paul persecute the followers of The Way?
- What happened in the encounter?
- So, what's the "big picture"?

### *Persecution*

- Paul was a Pharisee, an apocalyptic Jew, full of devotion to God's will (cf. Phil 3:5-6)
- Paul was informed about Christian teaching (as usual)
- Paul objected on the basis of Deut 21:22-23
- Paul objected: they were speaking falsely of God (cf. 1 Cor 15:15)
- Paul objected: they were spreading (cf. Acts 5:33-40a)
- Paul objected: they were poaching the God-Fearers (cf. Acts 10; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:6-9)

**Deut 21:22** If a person commits a sin punishable by death and is executed, and you hang the corpse on a tree, **23** his body must not remain all night on the tree; instead you must make certain you bury him that same day, for the one who is left exposed on a tree is cursed by God. You must not defile your land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

If a man is a traitor against his people and gives them up to a foreign nation, so doing evil to his people, you are to hang him on a tree until dead. On the testimony of two or three witnesses he will be put to death, and they themselves shall hang him on the tree. If a man is convicted of a capital crime and flees to the nations, cursing his people and the children of Israel, you are to hang him, also, upon a tree until dead. But you must not let their bodies remain on the tree overnight; you shall most certainly bury them that very day. Indeed, anyone hung on a tree is accursed of God and men, but you are not to defile the land that I am about to give you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). **(11Q19 64:7-13)**

### *Encounter*

**Gal 1:11** Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. **12** For I did not receive it or learn it from any human source; instead I received it by a revelation of Jesus Christ.

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**Gal 1:15** But when the one who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace was pleased **16** to reveal his Son in me so that I could preach him among the Gentiles, I did not go to ask advice from any human being, **17** nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, but right away I departed to Arabia, and then returned to Damascus.

**1 Cor 15:8** Last of all, as though to one born at the wrong time, he appeared to me also.

**Gal 3:6** Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, **7** so then, understand that those who believe are the sons of Abraham. **8** And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel to Abraham ahead of time, saying, "All the nations will be blessed in you." **9** So then those who believe are blessed along with Abraham the believer. **10** For all who rely on doing the works of the law are under a curse, because it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not keep on doing everything written in the book of the law." **11** Now it is clear no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous one will live by faith. **12** But the law is not based on faith, but the one who does the works of the law will live by them. **13** Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (because it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree") **14** in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles, so that we could receive the promise of the Spirit by faith.

- The covenant (and the Law) entailed blessings and curses
- Curse, in this context, means exclusion from the covenant blessings, having the status of an outsider
- The manner of Jesus' death placed him "outside the Law" - according to Deut 21:22-23
- This was God's intention and purpose...but why?
  
- To show that the time of the (ritual) Law was over
- To bring to fulfilment of the promise beyond the ethnic boundaries of Judaism
- To include the Gentiles...but how?
- By going outside the law and becoming an outsider himself

#### The big picture

- A key text is Romans 3:21-26
- Read two translations
- Notice the significant differences
- So what is Paul saying?

ESV (English Standard Version)	NET (New English Bible)
<p><b>Rom 3:21</b> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <b>22</b> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <b>23</b> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <b>24</b> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <b>25</b> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <b>26</b> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.</p>	<p><b>Rom 3:21</b> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed— <b>22</b> namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, <b>23</b> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. <b>24</b> But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. <b>25</b> God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. <b>26</b> This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness.</p>

- God disclosed himself to the Israelites / the Jewish people.
- God disclosed himself fully and finally in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.
  - ▶ Jesus is risen from the dead; he is Messiah and Lord, as the Christians were proclaiming.

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- ▶ His death was an act of compassionate solidarity with all “outside the law”.
- ▶ His resurrection has ushered in the end times, disclosing God’s universal salvation.
- Jesus’ faithfulness in death discloses God’s faithfulness to fractured humanity.
- The resurrection discloses God’s faithfulness to Jesus and, in him, to all humanity.
- Because of God’s salvation in Christ, enacted and alive through the Holy Spirit (Galatians):
  - ▶ Paul is free to give himself fully to the proclamation of the Good News (Romans)
  - ▶ Paul is free to love and to serve (1 Thessalonians)
  - ▶ Paul is free to be joyful (Philippians)
  - ▶ Paul is free to be “indifferent” (Philippians)
  - ▶ Paul is free to hope (Romans)
- Paul remains a human being with all the faults etc, but with an extraordinary sense of purpose

### Can we learn from St Paul?

- Tremendous energy
- Capacity to attract others to work with him
- The big picture (the “coherent”)
- The local reality (the “contingent”)
  
- A prism refracting Christ then and now
- Compassionate solidarity (love)
- Faithfulness (faith)
- Trust (hope)

**1 Cor 13:13** And now these three remain: **faith, hope, and love**. But the greatest of these is love.

**1 Thess 1:2** We thank God always for all of you as we mention you constantly in our prayers, **3** because we recall in the presence of our God and Father **your work of faith and labour of love and endurance of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Rom 5:1** Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by **faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God’s glory. **3** Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, **4** and endurance, character, and character, **hope. 5** And **hope** does not disappoint, because the **love** of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

- Do these teachings of Paul speak to us today?
- What kind of disciple should I be?
- What kind of church should we be?

### Resources

Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ*.

Ricard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*.

Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence. How Christianity is Changing and Why*

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*

Kieran J. O’Mahony, *Do We Still Need St Paul? A Contemporary Reading of the Apostle*

Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Living Paul. An Introduction to the Apostle and his Thought*

James P. Ware, *Paul’s Theology in Context*

### Conversation