Choral Matins
The First Sunday after Trinity
Psalm 82; Deuteronomy 5: 1–21; Acts 21: 17–39a
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‘Transforming Grace’

Have you shaved or trimmed your beard this morning? (Lev. 19: 27) Have you come to church wearing clothes made of different fabrics? (Lev. 19: 19) If so, you, like me, have fallen foul of the commandments of the Law. For beyond the 10 commandments that we still recite in church today, traditional rabbinic Judaism has followed Rabbi Semlai in counting 613 commandments or mitzvoth in Torah.

And that was precisely what Paul was accused of in our second reading today. As he returned from his missionary journey to bring a collection of alms for the relief of famine-stricken Jerusalem, Paul the once-devout Pharisee is accused by Jews of being corrupted by his Gentile mission.

The Council of Jerusalem had earlier agreed that Gentile converts were not expected to take upon themselves the full strictures of Torah but simply to obey three ethical commands – to keep away from food that had been sacrificed to idols, to avoid meat that had been strangled or not drained of its blood, and to abstain from fornication. However, there seems to have been the expectation that Jewish Christians would continue to keep the whole law, go on circumcising their sons and observing the customs of their ancestors.

Paul is pressured to act as patron to a group of men completing a Nazirite vow, as defined in Numbers 6. The offerings at the end could be expensive and so wealthy Jews often supported such holy enterprises, without going through the full separation for the Lord.

It was a sort of publicity exercise, showing the religious communities of Jerusalem that Paul still respected both the Mosaic Law and the ancestral customs that had grown up around it. And Paul at this point has not yet come to the full realisation that will underpin his Letters to the Romans and Galatians. He is still being led by the Spirit into
all truth and has yet to fully understand the power of Christ’s transforming grace, so he agrees.

But like many a PR stunt today, it backfires and Paul’s presence in the Temple angers the crowds even more, as he is suspected of smuggling one of his converts, Trophimus the Ephesian. For even Greeks who followed the Mosaic Law could only enter as far as the Court of the Gentiles and inscriptions on the pillars around the inner court stated in Greek, in no uncertain terms, “No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and embankment around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.”

And thus a riot begins and Paul will find himself arrested and, as his preaching stirs up even more trouble for the authorities, on his way to Rome in chains. But today I don’t want to follow him on the rest of that journey but instead pause a moment to reflect on his attitude to the Law at this point in his life.

Through his conversion and calling to mission and ministry among the Gentiles, Paul has begun to understand that the Law is not the whole way to God and salvation but rather belief in the name of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit. He does not impose its strictures on his new converts but he has not yet seen to the heart of grace.

For what he will come to understand later is that even the most central parts of the Mosaic Law and covenant, such as the Ten Commandments are fundamentally doomed in their attempt to change fallen humanity from the outside in. Social expectation, peer pressure, language of covenant can limit sin but can never truly transform the human person.

As Paul would come to see, this does not mean an abandonment of the revelation of Torah but rather a radical re-centring of its significance. The psalmist said, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High; yet you shall die like men.’ (Ps. 82: 6–7) – there is a gap between what we are and what we are meant to be; the marring of the image God set within each of us by sin and the brokenness of our world. No commandment could make up this gap or repair that image. And yet in the background to our first reading, there is a hint of what could.

For when Moses met God on Mount Sinai and spoke to him face to face, Exodus tells us his own face was changed (Ex. 34: 29). It shone with a radiance that made the people afraid and he was forced to veil his face in their presence. When Moses met God, he was transformed from the inside out.
And some years later when he was writing to his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul would come to see that the same thing needs to happen to us – that we must become one with the Spirit, so that, beholding the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, we might be changed into God’s likeness from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3: 18).

Laws, commandments and customs can only limit our external behaviours – something that can be help a little and may be the best a secular society can ethically hope for. But true faith is based on transforming grace – the work of the Spirit from the inside out, as we give ourselves over daily to the Holy Spirit, groaning within us with sighs too deep for words, drawing us into the mystery of the divine life of the Trinity, and renewing the whole creation according to God’s eternal plan.

It is a radical truth that needs to grasped over and over again. We cannot blame Paul for not having reached it at once but should use his example to urge us to look at our own lives and faith. Do we really live by transforming grace? Does our faith change us from the inside out through the work of the Holy Spirit or are we going through the external motions?

As individuals, as society, as the Church we need to be recalled to the wonder of transforming grace over and over again. We can see it down the ages in the work of a Martin Luther or a John Wesley. Each rediscovered the Gospel of grace and started a revolution within church and society. As an early church man at heart though, I can’t look too far beyond the example of the desert’s abbas and ammas. And one of my favourite sayings sums up this sense of transforming grace typically gnomically.

“Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said, ‘Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and, as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?’ Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, ‘If you will, you can become all flame’.” (Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Abba Joseph 7)

It is not that what Abba Lot was doing was wrong or unhelpful but he was asking the wrong question in wanting to do something more; rather he had to be something more – to truly meet God in prayer and be transformed into his likeness, the image of glory and consuming fire. Sadly I cannot end this sermon by transforming my own fingers into lamps of fire, I still have rather too far to go on my own journey from glory to glory. But I urge you – call upon the Spirit of God today and every day and let yourself be transformed by his grace.