

Pako Morning Service 19/06/2016

Readings: Psalm 22:1-18; Galatians 6:11-18; Message "Boasting in the cross"

Congregation, in my senior years, I have become a little bit of a wimp insofar as watching films with excessive violence and awful endings. Sometime ago, I watched a film called The Green Mile. It starred Tom Hanks as the prison guard and Michael Duncan as the prisoner on death row. And it was a rather spooky show with it ending when the perhaps innocent prisoner was finally executed on the electric chair. Just an awful ending and it made me shiver at the thought of capital punishment, whatever form it takes.

Now you might be wondering why I have entitled this sermon, "Boasting in the cross" for that is also a symbol of death. I do so, for that is what we find in our text today. Note verse 14; "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." The cross, is perhaps the cruellest of all instruments used to end one's life. It was an agonising death!

And yet Paul says, if I am ever going to boast about anything, it is in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am sure if you or I would go about boasting about the latest hanging or electric chair event that has occurred, people would think we had a screw loose. So why would Paul say what he says towards the end of this letter to the Galatian churches?

I would suggest that this single statement encapsulates the message of the entire book. This letter isn't about its length or the size of the lettering (v11), something that people have written volumes about, but Paul is placing works of the flesh if you will as a way of salvation, over against the cross.

I am sure you all know the refrain by now. We have been made right with God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That means we are a people who can boast in the cross for that's where we were set free! That's where we were forgiven and given eternal life in glory!

In fact, I would go so far as to say, if you are ashamed of the cross and what was accomplished there, than you have not understood the gospel fully. We could even go a step further and say if your Christian faith is all about you and what you have or are doing, you haven't understood the message of the cross.

Oh how I despise people who try to impress you, whether they are politicians, CEO's, preachers or leaders of congregations by bragging about all they have achieved. And I especially cringe every time a preacher brags about his many converts, or the number of church plants they have done.

That was the problem with the Judaizers and Paul warns against two things, the first mentioned in v12a. Paul warns against "Those who want to make a good impression outwardly, are trying to compel you to be circumcised." The Judaizers were "glorying" in their own works. Apparently, the more foreskins they collected, the more impressed people would be back home in Jerusalem.

Instead of being a ministry targeting a change in people's hearts with the gospel, it was all for show and all about them, trying to impress. Perhaps they were trying to impress each other, perhaps the leaders of the synagogues, who ever or whatever, I was about them.

Now I am not suggesting that we shouldn't be making a good impression – sure we must. But our boasting or trying to make a good impression should never be about the works we do, but about the cross. That's they only thing worth bragging about!

It is the cross where the Saviour of sinners laid down his life for us. It's the cross and what was accomplished there that is the reason for our forgiveness and eternal life. The Judaizers were interested in the cross, but they wanted to add circumcision and even regarded it as a prerequisite for salvation. For the Judaizers, salvation meant the cross plus circumcision.

Congregation, there is always the temptation, even today, to add something to the gospel as necessary for salvation. Well, whenever you see the "plus" sign, whether it be a deed, a sacrament, or some other duty, then you will have robbed the cross of all its power! Our boast must only ever just be in the cross. The cross needs to stand alone.

But to be circumcised wasn't the only reason why they were pressuring people into be circumcised. A second underlying reason was fear. Paul picks up on this at the end of v12b. "The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ."

Interestingly, the severest persecutions for the early Gentile Christians didn't always come from the Romans, but from their fellow countrymen. Think of Stephen, who was stoned by the Sanhedrin (Acts 7), or of Paul before his conversion, dragging Christians out of their homes (Acts 9:1–2).

There was an easy way to avoid it and that was to be circumcised. The only way to appease the anger of fellow circumcised Jews was not to associate with Christians who were not circumcised, or at the very least show that you were making every attempt to have them circumcised.

However, the Apostle Paul saw through their hypocrisy. Deep down, they were not willing to be persecuted for the cause of Christ. Well, there is nothing new under the sun. I think it is our natural inclination to avoid confrontation, suffering, or even to invite persecution. That is what we leave ourselves open too when we tell people they are sinners and need a Saviour who died on a cross!

Even when we do it winsomely, it may still bring ridicule and suffering and perhaps even persecution. Who wants to be told that they need to leave a life of sin and cling only to the cross?

It has all sorts of ramifications. No more being sexually immoral. No more drunken parties. No more sex before marriage. No more loving yourself more than your neighbour. No more spending all your money on self, but also giving for the Lord's kingdom. That's what the cross implies.

Yet, it is the cross where the Christian faith starts and its truth needs to penetrate the heart. The Christian faith is not based on outward works; it is based on inward faith and it starts when the Holy Spirit causes a change of heart. The Judaizers, by insisting on circumcision, didn't realize that if you insist on a works salvation, then you are obliged to keep the whole law (Gal 5:3). But they couldn't keep the law fully, no sinner can.

Note the beginning of v13, "Not even those circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh." This was a case of hypocrisy at its worst.

Thankfully, we boast only in the cross of Christ as Paul does in v14. According to John Stott, to boast in the cross is to glory in it, to trust in it, to rejoice in it, to revel in it, indeed to live for it. The object of our boast or 'glory' fills our horizons, engrosses our attention, and absorbs our time and energy. In a word, our 'glory' is our obsession.

Paul was obsessed with the cross. He did not boast about his popularity, intellect, influence, appearance, income, or job performance. He did not boast about his circumcision or his Jewish genealogy. Paul was only willing to boast about the cross of Christ.

Paul boasted about the cross in his letter to the Galatians. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (2:20). In Ch 3:1 he wrote, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (Gal. 3:1).

Look at his other letters. 1 Cor 1:23, "But we preach Christ crucified:..." 1 Cor 2:2; "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (cf 1 Cor. 1:18, Gal. 5:11, Col. 2:15, Phil. 2:8). Paul was always boasting about the cross. Christ crucified meant the world to him, as it should to us. The cross is not just something to boast about; it is the only thing to boast about.

The cross is the only thing to boast about because it means that God loves us enough to die for us, that he saved us through the death of his own dear Son. It is through the cross we have been redeemed, for it was there that Christ has paid the whole price for our salvation. The cross and all that occurred there means that we have forgiveness for our sins and made right with God. It is the cross that turns God's wrath away.

However, we can only boast about the cross if we die to everything else that we may like to boast about. To revel, to glory in the cross means we don't glory in our works, our church attendance, and we renounce anything and everything we can do to save ourselves.

To glory in the cross is to stop trusting in our worship style, our devotional habits, our social involvement, or theological orthodoxy, or even the number of converts. To glory in the cross means to start trusting in the merits of Jesus Christ alone.

The Galatians had to make a choice between the cross and circumcision. It was either one or the other, but it could not be both. We have the same choice. To boast about what you have done or haven't done will mean you will never boast about Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ is the all-sufficient ground for the salvation of sinners or it's nothing. Boasting in the cross also means living a crucified life. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14a).

It's ironic that v14 doesn't just describe one crucifixion, but three. First, the cross was the place where Christ died for our sins. Second, it is also the place where we put "self" to death from the moment we are converted. For then we are joined inseparably to him.

Sometimes it has been said of me, "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy!" The same is true for our Christian faith. Christ is in the Christian and the Christian is in Christ. From the moment of our conversion, we died with Christ and are crucified with him. It means crucifying the natural desires of the flesh. Our sin needs to be nailed to the cross and left there to die.

There is also a third crucifixion that occurs. Paul says that the world was crucified to us. In other words, the godless values of the world die in us because of the cross. As Christians we no longer think the way the world thinks, talk the way the world talks, or misbehave the way the world misbehaves. We are now a new creation.

Our works count for nothing or as Paul puts it, "neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal. 6:15). Once we come to the cross for salvation, everything becomes irrelevant except what Jesus has done.

"If anyone is in Christ," Paul later told the Corinthians, "he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). It's the cross and the cross all alone that counts. It's actually the work of the Holy Spirit, regenerating us, bringing us to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ who makes us see the value of the cross alone.

Paul ends with a benediction, a blessing. V16; "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God!" This benediction grants peace and mercy between Jew and Gentile and mercy from God for sinners. But notice that the blessing is conditional. Peace and mercy are only for those who "walk by this rule." And the rule, the norm is that this blessing is only for those who trust in Christ alone for the salvation.

For some people the norm, the rule is to follow rules and laws. For the Judaizers it was to be circumcised. For some today it is other things, worship styles, or the singing or not singing of certain hymns or songs in worship. Please don't add a plus sign to Jesus. Don't go there. We boast only in the cross or if you like Jesus Christ alone.

The phrase "upon the Israel of God" I believe refers to both Jews and Gentiles that trust in Christ alone, the new Israel. Paul, even though speaking very strongly against the beliefs of his own country men, seems to hold out, or reach out an olive leaf. It's almost an appeal. If there were any Jews hearing this message and no doubt there would have been, he is saying that this blessing of peace and mercy is also for them if they trust, or if you like, revel and glory in the cross alone.

V17 is warning to the Judaizers, perhaps a plea – don't give me any more trouble. They had followed him all the way from Jerusalem to interfere with his gospel of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, or if you will to boast only in the cross alone.

But when one thinks about it, it is also a warning to every Christian for it shows what kind of treatment we can expect for boasting in the cross. Sooner or later, every Christian who glories in the cross will face opposition. Some will even bear on their bodies "the marks of Jesus" or the 'stigma' of the cross.

A parishioner came up to my previous mentor, who had been a minister in one congregation for sixteen years, and said to him, "When are you going to give us something more than this Jesus stuff?" Can you believe that?

It wasn't that this guy wasn't a Christian necessarily; he just didn't get it! If you have Jesus, you have it all already! If you want Jesus plus – you have nothing. Congregation, let us boast in the cross alone. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.