Justified by Faith! Galatians 2:11-16

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul records a confrontation between himself and Peter. When did Peter go to Antioch? We don’t know, and we can’t be sure when this event took place (Luke doesn’t mention it in Acts). Paul introduces the topic abruptly, and almost seems to assume that his readers in Galatia will know what he is talking about. That may mean that they have already heard about the incident from another source, and one unsympathetic to Paul’s point of view. So his aim here is to set the record straight. Paul’s account of the incident is far from being objective and dispassionate!

We know that Peter’s role was to take the gospel of Jesus to circumcised Jews (Galatians 2:7) and his change in behaviour could have been prompted by a legitimate concern that he would lose his credibility amongst conservative Jews if it became known that he had been consorting with Gentiles (Acts 10:28). This would especially be the case if the Council of Jerusalem had already happened and the stipulations of the decree (Acts 15:19-20) were not being scrupulously observed in Antioch.

There are two sides to every story, and we only get Paul’s perspective in Galatians 2, where he accuses a church leader (Peter) and his best friend (Barnabas) of acting from the basest of motives. How could he possibly have known what they were thinking? Have you ever been in a situation where you have thought the worst of someone – or maybe they thought the worst of you – and it was all a horrible misunderstanding? How did you handle it? Paul had a very public confrontation with Peter. Why do you think he handled the situation this way? Could he – should he – have responded differently?

It's an ugly episode. Why do you think Paul accuses Peter of fear and hypocrisy? The fact that Barnabas sided with Peter on this issue suggests that he did not agree with Paul’s assessment. How do you think Barnabas felt? Paul, presumably, was concerned at the impact that Peter’s behaviour would have had on the gentile believers in Antioch, when he stopped eating with them. Why do you think that Paul accuses Peter of forcing them to live like Jews? Putting yourself in their shoes for a moment, how do you think they felt about the behaviour of Peter, and of Paul?

Paul responded as strongly as he did because as far as he was concerned, the very truth of the gospel was at stake. Despite the tendency of English translations to insert a new subject heading at the beginning of verse 15, there is actually no indication that Paul has stopped talking to Peter at the end of verse 14. It is quite possible that in Galatians 2:15-16, Paul sets out what he said to Peter (or maybe with hindsight what he wishes he had to said to Peter!) at Antioch, and he does so for the benefit of his readers in Galatia. In these verses, we have a classic exposition of how and why we are justified by faith, but let’s not forget that behind these verses lies the big issue of inclusion: were gentile believers to be accepted on the basis of their faith in Christ? Or would they be required to observe Jewish food laws before Jewish believers would have fellowship with them? For Paul, the answer to the first question was yes, and the second, no. The men from James took precisely the opposite stance. It looks as if Peter and Barnabas weren’t too sure… So then, are we justified by faith in Christ, by works of the law, or by faith plus works? What would Paul say? What would James say (James 2:14-18)? What would you say? The classic solution to this dilemma is to say that it is faith which saves us, and genuine faith will be followed by works. But if we are saved on the basis of faith, does that mean we are called to welcome others on the basis of their faith, even if the works we would expect and hope to see are not yet apparent?

The men from James drew a line to exclude believers on the basis of their diet, which is a matter of no great significance to us. It’s a salutary reminder/warning that as soon as we draw lines about issues that we think are really important, we run the risk of excluding those whom Christ accepts and welcomes on the basis of their faith. To what extent are we prepared to embrace the radical truth that God in Christ justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5), and to welcome people on that basis?

If someone were to ask you what it means to be ‘justified’, how would you explain this to them? And if they were to ask, ‘On what basis can I be justified in God’s sight?’ how would you answer? What does it mean to have faith in Christ?

The New English Translation shifts the emphasis of Galatians 2:16 away from faith as our subjective response to Christ, to the faithfulness Christ showed in how he lived and died: ‘…we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.’ It’s a legitimate translation. What do we gain, and what do we lose by reading Paul’s words this way?

What one thing should you take on board as a result of reflecting on this passage?

Forgive them all, Lord:

our sins of omission and our sins of commission;

the sins of our youth and the sins of our riper years;

the sins of our souls and the sins of our bodies;

our secret and our more open sins;

our sins of ignorance and surprise,

and our more deliberate and presumptuous sin;

the sins we have done to please ourselves

and the sins we have done to please others;

the sins we know and remember,

and the sins we have forgotten;

the sins we have striven to hide from others

and the sins by which we have made others offend;

forgive them, O Lord, forgive them all for his sake,

who died for our sins and rose for our justification,

and who now stands at thy right hand to make intercession for us,

Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

John Wesley, from *The Hodder Book of Christian Prayers*