

## TUESDAY COMMUNION

"The Privilege of Belonging"

Hymn: 758 In Christ there is no east or west

Reading: Romans 2.25 – 3.4(b)

Prayers:

Our reading raises two questions.

***The first question is about what gives our sense of being who we are.***

I suspect that many factors come into play:

- where we were born
- the family in which we grew up
- our school and our work.

For some of us, our identity has also been formed by the religious tradition in which we grew up and the ceremonies that surrounded us: baptism, Sunday School, confirmation.

It gives us our sense of belonging and even those who lapse from their Christian upbringing will often speak of how it has shaped their lives!

Circumcision was a central act in the life of a Jewish male. It gave him his sense of identity and with it went the obligations that belonged to those who were part of that tradition, especially an obedience to the Jewish law. Almost 200 years before the time of Paul, when the Syrians sought to control Israel, they had banned Jews from circumcising their males. They wanted to break the nation.

Instead, the nation rose up in revolt. Many were killed for their faith and the memory of this was still lively in Paul's time.

Paul certainly wasn't opposed to circumcision for those who were Jews but he did not believe that only those who were Jewish could be members of the family of God. He speaks of a gentile who keeps the law without having been circumcised. Will not God regard him as circumcised, as a member of his family?

Isn't the real circumcision "***a matter of the heart***", spiritual and not literal? Paul seems to be asking that challenging question, "Isn't there a danger that the symbols of belonging, exclude those haven't been through our ceremonies?"

Isn't there a danger that even Christian baptism can make us think that only Christians are acceptable to God? Can't it create the sense of belonging which almost automatically excludes others and create the divisions which Christ came to overcome?

**So to our other question.**

- If Gentile men and women are acceptable to God even though they have not been baptised what point is there in being Jewish?
- Perhaps a question Christians sometimes ask, "If some Muslims and Hindus and People of no Religious Faith can be acceptable to God through the quality of their lives then what's the point of being a Christian?"

Paul's answer to the question, "***Then what advantage has the Jew?***" is to say, "***Much in every way. In the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.***"

He looks back over the long story of God's dealings with the people of Israel. Even then it was a story which went back a thousand years to the time of King David and further back still through the stories which were told and retold.

For Paul, as for us, it was a unique story of success and failure, of God's graciousness towards this people but also of our human frailty and failure.....

It was through this long story of God's dealings with Israel that she had come to know God and receive an understanding of what he wanted for his people. That, in itself, was a great privilege.

Christians, too, are privileged both to be co-heirs with our Jewish friends of that great tradition of God's faithfulness to Israel but also to bear witness to what he has done in the life of one circumcised Jew, Jesus. But Paul would remind us that Jesus came not just for those who were Jews not just for those who call themselves Christians.

He came to create a new humanity, a new people,- and it is not for us to place a limit on who God finds acceptable to him.

You and I are privileged to have seen, what many can not see, that in Christ, and him crucified, the eternal God is revealed to us.

We are privileged to have the Spirit of Christ within us. The danger would be if we allowed our identity as Christians to become a barrier to God's work of establishing a new, open, loving and trusting humanity.

Our Christian identity must turn us into a people living a fortress but a people who in Christ's name build bridges to all with whom share life in this world.

Amen.