
Alienated from God?

A Sermon at Union Chapel

Readings: Psalm 85
Colossians 1:21–29
Mark 15:25–39

10 June 2007

Formerly you yourselves were alienated from God, his enemies
in heart and mind, as your evil deeds showed. Colossians 1:21

“Alienated from God”. What does this mean? How do we *feel* this? What picture do we make of it? And: “evil deeds”? This language falls, if not exactly on deaf ears – for it seems to me that we all try, by and large, to listen, as attentively as we can, to the Bible – it falls, if not on deaf ears, at least on unresponsive hearts: it has no resonance for us, it leaves us cold. And I suspect that we are similarly left cold, not just by language about being alienated from God, but by any language about alienation.

It was not always so. Even quite recently – and by quite recently I mean something like twenty or thirty years ago, which is recently from the point of view of someone my age, and a mere eye-blink in the longer perspective of the history of Christianity – even as recently as that there was lots of talk of alienation. Marxism, that is, was still fashionable (at least among the literati), and people felt very alienated: alienated – that is, made strangers, separated from – other people, separated from them by the injustices of society, by the oppressive structures of the capitalist world, and so on. And there was a great longing (certainly not just among Christians) for a better way of living, a way of living that would leave us much less divided and separated from each other (and also, the Christians at the time would say, less separated from God). So, one would think, if I were preaching this twenty years ago it would have been easier: I could go on at some length about alienation, and use the momentum of that to jump nimbly over the rest of the text.

And Paul, too, you would think, must have known what to say: he was, after all, a Jew, and a very dedicated Jew, and Jewish religion contained an immense system of worship, rituals, and sacrifice, all designed to overcome alienation: to find what had gone wrong between us and God and to put it right. And so you have a great temple in Jerusalem, and you have a priesthood, and you have daily sacrifices, all for the purpose of overcoming alienation. So, you would think, this is why Paul can use this language in such an uninhibited way: it had a real meaning for him, and he could just use it.

But: was it really so? Paul, now: certainly, he was a Jew, and certainly his thought was thoroughly permeated by Judaism. But still: he was not writing to Jews but to Gentiles, and he was a skilled orator, always considering his audience, and his audience had certainly not been brought up in Judaism. Nor did he want them to become Jews: he strenuously resisted the people in the early church who wanted all of the Gentile converts to get circumcised. He thought that God wanted the Gentile converts to remain Gentile. And he also thought that there was something deeply wrong with the Jewish sacrificial system: it was a system that he deeply loved, that went to the centre of what he was, but he also thought that, as a way of reconciling people to God, it plain did not work. And so he thought that God's purposes were now directly working themselves out among the Gentiles, that the church was now outside of Judaism. So, from this perspective, Paul's job as a preacher is not so easy: he has to talk about Jewish concepts to a bunch of Gentiles, but – even more confusingly – what he is trying to teach these Gentiles is not Judaism but something else, something rather more difficult to describe.

So, back to the beginning. One thing to notice here is that Paul starts off by saying “formerly”: this alienation, though it existed at one time, holds no longer. Jesus has overcome it, and has overcome it, not in any abstract way, but by living among us as one of us, and has shown us, in his own life, what God is. “He who has seen me”, as he said, “has seen the Father”. But he has also shown us what alienation from God is: he has shown us both sides of it, both the side of the sufferer who feels his or her utter separation from God (which, as the reading shows, is something extreme), but also the other side of alienation: the side of the people who, because of *their* alienation from God, inflict evil on each other. Christ has shown us all this. And he has also given us new life: has brought the evil of human deeds out into the open, has shown them for what they are, but who has also shown us how to live a life that is, once more, united with God.

Our deeds are, of course, evil: we have only to think of how involved we are with the economics of the world, with the way in which we, as con-

sumers, exploit poor and vulnerable people half way across the world from us; or to think of the way in which our life renders the world uninhabitable in the future for our descendants, or uninhabitable now for many in the poorest countries. Paul frequently goes on in a similar way, talking of the evils of the lives that people, in their ignorance of God, live.

But it is important to realise that Paul only *starts* there: that is not where he finishes. As in the reading today, he always puts the alienation into the past: *formerly*, he says, you were alienated from God, but now you are living differently. He says, as Jesus did, that it is possible to live a new life, a life close to God: and this closeness to God is shown by freedom and by how we treat our fellow human beings.

Three things are important here. Firstly, he says, this new life is within our grasp: it is something that we are actually living now. As he says, "Christ in you, the hope of glory". Secondly, he says that none of this is obvious or open to view: he talks here of "God's secret purpose", and by "secret" he probably means, not just private, but something which is difficult to see even when it's in front of your eyes. In his case, I suppose, part of this is the ability to see God's purpose at work even in Paul's sufferings: he writes this letter from prison, and it is presumably not a Paris Hilton-style holiday camp. And, finally, he talks of wisdom and maturity: the wisdom and maturity to realise that God is at work and that everything is not all alienation, but also the wisdom and maturity to respect the hiddenness of God's plans, to see that not everything is as straightforward as it might seem, to realise that there might still be a few detours to make before we become mature members of Christ's body.

©Graham White 2007