“***Jew or Greek***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, June 23, 2019

**Isaiah 65:1-5, 18**

1 I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that did not call on my name.

2 I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; 3 a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks;

4 who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine’s flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels; 5 who say, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.” These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long. . . .

17For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

**Gal 3:23-29**

23Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.25But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Let’s start with the Isaiah passage. His first point is that people who had not known God, who had not sought God, have started to call on him, and God responds by saying “Here I am” (Isa 65:1). So this would be another nation, not Israel. But that point gets dropped, and he starts obsessing about how disloyal are some of the people of Israel. Only much later in the chapter is there even a hint of other nations again, when God says he will create a new heavens and a new earth, and the wolf and the lamb will lie down together peacefully (65:17, 25). Inclusion of the Gentiles was such a radical concept, that it has to be expressed symbolically, and presented as part of the magical transformation of the whole world. It sounds a bit unreal.

But for Paul the inclusion of the Gentiles is a concrete reality. Jesus had already ministered to Gentiles, healed them, changed their lives, but there was as yet no church for them to join. In Paul’s time, there are church communities within which the teachings are tried out, so the inclusion of Gentiles is a reality that is practiced every time the community meets. It is a challenge, but they rise to meet it.

For Paul, the coming of Jesus *has* changed the whole world. Notice the contrast he makes between “before” and “now.” He says “before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the Law until faith would be revealed” (Gal 3:23). But “now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian” (3:25). You see, everything was *one* way, and now everything is *another* way. The spiritual facts of life have been completely changed by the Incarnation of the Messiah. When Paul says “the law was our disciplinarian” (3:24), he means that the Law of Moses was like our chaperone. We were guarded by the Law, not *trusted*, really, and not able to be treated like full-fledged adults. Now that faith has come, now that Jesus the Messiah has come, a new way of living is available, the way of faith, and we can begin to live like adults, spiritually speaking.

He says, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (3:26), but I think we could translate that: “you are all *adults* of God if you live by faith, and you no longer need the Law to be your chaperone.” What a change of life this is, a *sea change*, and a coming of age. But such a huge change can be a bit scary, and it may make you stand out from the crowd.

Faith is a new way of living. For Paul, it’s as though the new heavens and the new earth have *come*. You get a new identity. He picks up on an image he uses earlier in Galatians, where he insists that everyone who has faith is a child of Abraham, spiritually speaking. It was a huge matter of pride and identity in those days to be able to say “I am a son or daughter of Abraham.” Paul shows that Abraham practiced faith when he believed God’s promise that he and Sarah would have offspring. Abraham, then, becomes the original faith practitioner. That is why Paul can say that, if you practice faith, you become a child of Abraham. You become part of a noble lineage.

You have put on a new identity when you put on Christ, like putting on a new set of clothing. And there is a new social rule. In one of the greatest lines in the New Testament, he says “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Within the kingdom of heaven, there is no class structure. The Jew’s religious heritage does not make him better than the Greek, nor does the Greek’s education make him better than the Jew. The most important division in Greco-Roman society, the one between slave and slave-owner, does not exist within the church. Even the division between male and female is not supposed to hold; there is to be no hierarchy between the genders. And so, it is improper to say that a woman cannot be an ordained minister!

And that is also why it is incorrect to look at the conservatism and hierarchy of the 4th century church and to say that the Bible affirmed all the old hierarchies. No, the church *backslid* to that place. Christianity did a better job of keeping its principles when it was a minority religion, and when the most powerful people in society were not members. As the old upper classes became Christian, the old boundaries began to re-establish themselves. The hierarchies reasserted themselves *within* the church, but that was not the way in the first 75 or hundred years. People have underestimated the radicalism of the early church. Paul recognized women in leadership many times in his letters to the Corinthians, Romans, and Philippians. He addresses a woman named Junia as an apostle, saying she was “prominent among the apostles . . . before I was” in Rom 16:7. So there were not only women in leadership, there were women apostles. Let us consider that a settled fact.

Christians really had to learn a new way of living. Jews had to stop looking at Gentiles with contempt. Gentiles had to stop thinking they were wiser than Jews. Men had to allow women in leadership; women had to rise to the occasion. Slaves and slave-owners had to talk to each other as though they were equals. Imagine the effort people had to make, but also think of what lessons they learned! It’s easy for *us* to come to church and meet with our friends. *They* had to come to church and change their whole way of relating to people of other nationalities or social levels.

Church should *still* be a place where people learn to relate to those they don’t normally interact with. Our Bible studies should be places where we really learn from others, as we hear stories or viewpoints that are different from our own. How will *you* contribute to the richness of our Bible studies? First, will you come? And in your daily life, will you be open to Christians from different cultures that you might meet? It’s an opportunity to see how the Christian message has been absorbed by other people.

Part of this involves using our imaginations. You do that when you watch a movie or read a book. You allow the writer to open you up to new experiences. We need a creative imagination in our spiritual life, too. In fact, the Bible prompts imagination. It shows us the spiritual reflection of people from long-ago cultures. Religion is not just faith and hope, it’s also discovery and reflection and spiritual stretching. Be open to Jew and Greek. Jesus loves them all.

Jesus welcomes you to the table, just as you are: questioning, listening, ready to learn and to share. Remember, “seek, and you will find” (Matt 7:7 RSV).