

Donnybrook

6 March 2022

Welcome

The number of books written about St Paul multiplies every year – it is literally impossible to keep up. And still, there are surprises. A few years ago, I came across a small study of St Paul by an unlikely character: French philosopher, Alain Badiou, a radical atheist and activist, wrote a book with the title *St Paul and the Foundation of Universalism*. The main point of the book was simple: the teaching that all humans are equal does not go back to recognised greats such as Plato or Aristotle. Instead, the first person to formulate it clearly and distinctly was St Paul. Badiou has no time for Paul's teaching on God or Christ or Gospel but he does expound, convincingly and even beautifully, this ground-breaking teaching of the apostle.

Topic

This teaching of St Paul comes out clearly in today's reading from Romans and, unfortunately, is needed today as never before.

Steps

A tiny bit of background to Romans may help. As we know St Paul persecuted Christians – he says so himself several times. On the way to Damascus, he had an experience of the Risen Lord – a powerful experience which turned his world upside down. He became convinced that God's special choice of the Jewish people had now been extended to all humanity: *there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for all are one in Christ*.

When he wrote to the Romans, there was a split among the Christ-believers there, a split along the ethnic lines. Christ-believers of Jewish background wanted to keep a great deal of their tradition such as the dietary laws; Christ-believers of Gentile – pagan – background felt themselves set free from such practices. Paul tries to be even-handed but is clearly on the side of the Gentiles. His argument is two-fold All, without distinction, are equal in need before God. All, without distinction, are equal in receiving grace before the same God. As we read in today's second reading:

When scripture says: *those who believe in him will have no cause for shame*, it makes no distinction between Jew and Greek: all belong to the same Lord who is rich enough, however many ask his help, *for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*.

For the first time in human history, the absolute equality of all human beings without qualification is affirmed.

Over the centuries, the Christian church has not always been faithful to the apostle – on the contrary, as we know. The contemporary sense we have of all being equal comes via the European Enlightenment, starting in the 17th century. The basic insight can be easily

described: liberalism recognises that people will not agree on the most important things – such as religion – but that we need to tolerate fellow citizens with views different from our own. For it to work, there has to be agreement on the constitution and laws of a country. The immediate background in European history was the devastating Thirty Years Wars, 1618-1648, left much of Europe in ruins. We in Ireland have virtually no cultural memory of it. Thinking people realised there must be another way to solve problems between states. The first person to propose the European Union was not Schumacher or Adenauer or De Gaulle. It was a French priest, active in the Enlightenment, called Charles-Irénée Castel, abbé de Saint-Pierre. In 1713, he published a detailed proposal called: *A Project for Perpetual Peace in Europe* – most of his proposals have been realised and he even used the term European Union. It is all based on recognition of the dignity of each single human being – the fundamental teaching of St Paul, all those centuries before.

Today, we need to discover again our common humanity, with its roots in the Christian Gospel. We are all equal in need before God and all equal in grace before God. I liked very much the recent appeal of Pope Francis to political leaders:

I would like to appeal to those with political responsibility to examine their consciences seriously before God, who is the God of peace and not of war; who is the Father of all, not just of some, who wants us to be brothers and sisters and not enemies. I pray that all the parties involved refrain from any action that would cause even more suffering to the people, destabilising coexistence between nations and bringing international law into disrepute.

Conclusion

The ordinary person feels powerless. But there are things we can do. As the Fr Vasyl Kornitsky, the Ukrainian priest in Dublin, said here on Wednesday: prayer unites, prayer is an experience of solidarity, prayer is an expression of love. We can also make offer support – the most effective is probably to donate money. We also need, as society, to prepare ourselves to welcome those who seek refuge from death and destruction. And there is hope. It is not clear that you can, by sheer brutality, force slightly over 41 million people to accept you as their liberator against their will.