

Blessed Virgin Mary

Galatians 4.4-7 & Luke 1.46-55

I do enjoy makeover programmes. My favourite was “House Doctor” with Anne Maurice. She swept into a house that the owners couldn’t sell, painted it magnolia and removed all the photos, and hey presto – it sold immediately.

Then came “Property ladder”. This programme went a stage further, and saw people buying old dilapidated properties, gutting them (often knocking down bits and building extensions), and then selling them on as modern des-res’.

Whilst House Doctor simply dealt with the outward appearance of a property, Property Ladder completely transformed it – inside and out.

In St Paul’s letter to the Galatians, our Epistle reading for this morning, Paul talks about the transformation Christ can bring to a human life; not just a cosmetic outward change, but a complete renewal, inside and out.

So complete a transformation that we totally change our status – from a slave to a child and an heir.

So, let’s do what all good TV makeover programmes do, and do a “before and after” shot to see how this transformation works.

Before transformation by Christ, the human condition is that of being “under the Law” (Galatians 4.4) and of being a “slave” to it (4.7).

How so?

Well, the Law in this case is God’s Law. The rules and regulations that God gave his people in the Old Testament, to show them how they might live in right relationship with Him.

The trouble was that no human being could keep all these rules and regulations perfectly.

So, every human being was bound to keep the Law to be right with God, but every human being broke the Law, so became a Law breaker, a criminal, and deserving of punishment.

Galatians 3.10: “All who rely on the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written ‘cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the Law.’”

So that’s before!

What about the after?

Well, after transformation by Christ, the human condition is that of “children” (4.5) and “heirs” (4.7).

After transformation, a human receives the Spirit of God, no less, and because the Spirit is the spirit of God’s Son Jesus, by possessing him human beings can become children of God like Jesus (4.6).

Could there be a more remarkable transformation?

Certainly in Paul’s day, a slave had no rights; he was completely trapped – at the beck, call and mercy of his master – he was not even a person!

But to be the son of a nobleman, of an emperor even, conferred an infinitely high status.

And it offered the promise of a great inheritance.

So, how is this transformation of humanity made possible?

Firstly by action on God’s part, and then by reception on ours.

In this short passage from Galatians, Paul uses three images to help us understand God’s action to make our transformation possible.

The first image is of Jesus ‘coming’.

Galatians 4.4: “But when the fullness of time had come, God *sent* his Son, *born* under the Law, in order to redeem those under the Law”.

There is a saying that Christ became what we are, so that we might become what he is.

Jesus came into our world, from the glories of heaven, he lived a human life, and he died a criminal’s death under the full weight of every human depravity and sin.

And then he rose again – to new life and to the glories of God’s right hand in heaven.

When sat in a deckchair on a cliff top, sun shining down and a good book to read, a man hears the cry of a drowning child, he is faced with a choice: will he shut his ears to the cry and carrying on reading? “I’m all right!”

Or will he leap from his leisure and throw himself into the waves, to swim to where the child is, and lift him from the depths and carry him to safety?

Christ, the Son of God, had all heaven at his feet.

But hearing the cries of a lost humanity, he got up from his throne in heaven, dived into the maelstrom of our evil world, descended to the most evil depths that humanity had sunk to, and lifted humanity up.

The second image Paul uses to help us understand how God makes our transformation possible is that of “redemption”.

Redemption is a word from the slave market.

In our own day and age, we might understand it more in terms of the pawnbrokers.

In need of money we take an expensive piece of jewellery to the pawnbrokers. In return for cash, we leave it with the broker.

In order to get it back, we must muster the necessary cash to redeem it. Until we do so, it is no longer ours.

Similarly, in Paul's day, people with a debt to pay and no means of raising the funds might sell themselves into slavery, until such a time as they had the money to buy their freedom back; or until a relative or some other kind person, paid the price of their redemption.

Humanity's sin, rebellion against God, was the act that sold us into slavery to the Law, to sin, to death.

As God, in Jesus, died on the cross, he paid the redemption price for us. And bought our freedom.

The third image Paul uses for God's effecting our transformation is that of adoption.

In Paul's day, it was quite possible for a Roman nobleman to take one of his slaves and adopt them as a child.

Unlike in our day and age, this adoption was complete, total and irreversible.

The adopted child received all the rights of a son, including inheritance rights, and his status was exactly that of any natural children.

It was the highest honour and most transformative thing that could ever happen to any child.

So God, in giving human beings his Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, adopts them as his children.

In the early 1800's an uneducated, drunken and violent tin miner, Billy Bray came to faith in Christ. He became a fervent preacher.

His favourite saying was, "I am a prince. I am the adopted son of God. I am the adopted son of a king."

So, if this is what God does to make the transformation of humanity possible, what is the part that humanity must play?

And here the answer is simple: have faith!

Galatians 3.26: "for in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God *through faith*."

There is something inside every human being that makes us feel that we ought to do something to put ourselves right with God.

We want to do something.
It offends us that God doesn't want us to do anything.
It dents our pride that we are helpless and have nothing sufficient to offer.

But that is our state.

A drowning child cannot save himself from the sea. A slave cannot afford his own freedom. An orphan cannot make someone adopt them.

All they can do is accept the help offered them.

All we can do is gratefully accept God's free gift of transformation – by faith in Jesus.

Today we celebrate the life of Mary; the young woman through whom God sent his son into the world.

In her meek acceptance of God's will for her, we see an example of faith in action.

May God free us from the terrors of a life thinking that we must do anything to win our status as children of God,

And give us that accepting faith that says, "thank you."

And then, with that status of princes and princesses; of sons and daughters of the king of kings, may we live lives worthy of who God has made us to be.