Reece Frith 13 – 10 – 24

"Social Reprimand"
Galatians 2:11 – 16

> "When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.
> For before certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.
> The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.
> When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all,
>
> > "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?
> > We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."

So that is our passage this morning -if you were in my place what would you preach on?
Tell the person next to you.

What we find is on the most intense in the New Testament: we read of two leading lights in the early Church who are in extreme and open conflict with each other.

Both Paul and Peter are Christ followers, both are men of God, both know what it means to be forgiven much and both have received the Holy Spirit. Both are Apostles of Jesus Christ, specially commissioned and invested with authority by Him.

Both had performed miracles and acts of power to God's glory, established and grown churches and are honoured for their leadership.
And as one commentator points out, "the book of Acts is virtually divided in half by them, the first part telling the story of Peter and the second the story of Paul".[1]

And yet here we are – two leading Apostles are at loggerheads.

The issues was around food.
When was the last time you had real dustup around food? ☺

By way of background is the issue of table fellowship.
In the time of Paul and Peter (and even in some cultures today) to share food around a table together was a sign of friendship, of welcome, of acceptance.
This was practiced by the early Church from its inception and more often than not would have included communion.
Orthodox Jews on the other hand considered themselves defiled or contaminated by contact with uncircumcised Non-Jews.

Yet eating with non-Jewish converts was Peter's regular practice.
As fully those fully accepted and saved by God's grace shown in Jesus Christ Peter ate with the non-Jewish Christians.

Then this group appears in Antioch.
They claimed to come from James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem (although again if you read Acts 15, this is refuted).

What were they saying?
According to Acts 15:1 they were teaching believers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

And alongside this, this group said it was wrong for Jewish believers to even share table fellowship with uncircumcised Gentile believers, even though they Gentile believers had believed in Jesus, had received the Holy Spirit and had been baptised.

[1] John Stott, *Galatians*, 49 – 50.

Here was a moment of very public conflict.
Paul confronts Peter.
He says, “I opposed him to his face… in front of them all”.
Paul gets absolutely stuck in!
I mean, Paul does not hold back.

What was at stake?
Well for one, the Gospel has social ramifications.

> I was reminded this week about the time when I hosted a combined evening church service for the town I was in. Combined services were common. Although from different denominations – Anglican, Baptist, AoG, and so on – every month one church would host and others were invited to join in. And so these would move around.
> When my turn came I knew there was a visiting speaker from Africa touring the country. The dates worked and so he could speak at the service. Word got around and the church was packed. When the speaker arrived and saw the numbers and I explained this was a combined churches service, his eyes widened and he asked, “How did you do it?”
> He wasn’t asking about my organisational skills or promotion; he was querying how people from different churches and denominations had come together to worship as one.
> You see where he was from, the denominational distrust, divide and even competition was still a thing.
>
> Some time ago I also heard the story of someone from New Zealand who wanted to go to church one morning while visiting the United States. So he randomly chose one and he went along. Yet even before had a chance to settle, he was asked to leave.
> Why? Why do you think?
> Well it was because he didn’t meet the dress code; he wasn’t well dressed enough.

These betray the truth that we are reconciled and acceptable to God through faith in Jesus Christ.
Justification is by faith alone.

To add to that a dress standard, or denominational or church lines that can't be crossed is to undermined what Jesus has done.

For Peter to capitulate to the groups legalistic demands was to say that the that they Gentile Christians were not fully accepted by God as His people and Jesus death was sufficient without Jewish customs.

Paul is rightly affronted.
Now at this point this morning we could talk about conflict and conflict management.
That was my intention but as I prepared this week I felt to go in another direction.

And it's this: how did it get to such a tense stand-off to begin with in the first place?
Could it have been avoided???

Well, yes.
We read, "when they arrived, he [Peter] began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group."

In Acts chapter 10 and 11 we're told Peter received direct special revelation that God does not show partiality and that non-Jews are made acceptable to God through Jesus.
He would not have forgotten that vision. There's no suggestion here that Peter had changed his mind.

Instead Peter – Cephas – succumbed to the social pressure placed on him by other Jews.
The Greek word for "draw back" suggests timidly shrinking into the background.
At the crux of it Peter no longer eats with non-Jews not out of personal conviction but out of fear.

So where I want to go this morning is around the issue of fear.

And fear is a topic the we hear about a lot.

"What do you think are the greatest fears at popular level?"

We're told that we're facing a climate emergency, on a daily basis.
We're bombarded with news pieces on ecology catastrophe.
We're in middle of a housing crisis and massive inequalities.

At a popular level – at an everyday level – I think there is one we don't hear much about.

It's found in our passage this morning.
I think at a popular level', that one of the greatest fears today is being the target of a *social reprimand*.

A social reprimand is where a group or a collection of people find your views so unacceptable and objectionable they therefore publicly chastise, dress down and censure you for holding to them!

Peter feared this kind of social reprimand.
Here were his fellow Jews placing great pressure on him and he succumbed.

> Some time ago I read about a young woman called Anna.
> Anna one evening went along to a play with family and friends, which she looking forward to.
> The play started just fine, the cast were great, it was an intimate and dark setting, and there was a sense of excitement in the air as the audience waited for it to begin, which Anna had as well.
> The play began as she expected – funny, interesting and engaging. The audience were chuckling from the first minute.
> But then suddenly the play took a turn. Anna was caught off guard by outbursts of profanity, sexual innuendo, locker room talk and what she called blatant lust.
> And Anna sat there feeling more and more uncomfortable by the minute.
> For *her*, she just couldn't sit through this.

She thought to herself, “I should leave. I should walk right down those stairs and leave. It doesn’t matter what they all think. It doesn’t matter that this cast will probably call me out. I just need to stop hearing this.”

But Anna felt paralyzed – she knew that if she left all the eyes in the room would be on here *and* I would be passing within feet of the actors. And so she sat in fear.
As the play wore on, she told herself that she’d leave after the next sexual comment, the next lewd reference. But each time she froze.

Finally, the curtain fell for the close of the First Act. There another barrier – her friend had bought her the ticket for the night. But Anna still feeling nervous, explained to her friend who bought her ticket why she couldn’t stay. Her friend was understanding, and she parted on good terms when she left early.

However, that was not so with my family. When they had a chance to catch up with her they said, why do you have to be a “social weirdo”???

For Anna the social reprimand came from her family.

What a social reprimand often attempts to do it publicly shame people into cultural conformity or silence.

And yet followers of Jesus have a history of, at appropriate times, speaking up and speaking out.

The thing about faith in Jesus Christ is that it is always personal... but it’s never private.
It encompasses the whole of our lives and there will be times where will have to act on our convictions and speak up and speak out.

But what can happen – and *is* happening – is that when the threat and fear of social reprimand takes hold... we go quiet.
Deeply held convictions and that which we know to be true and experienced are relegated to the private realm.

So here's my next question:

"How do we face the fear of social reprimand?"

Well the first thing I'd say is t*here is a cost.*
It has to be said that there is a cost in following Jesus; that there are times when we will be called to speak up and speak out and act on our convictions and that will be costly.

It has to be said that it's not Jesus intention that we face opposition and suffering, but it is its consequence.
Every age and generation has its sacred cultural cows, its unquestionable assumptions and incontestable values.
And many of these will be at odds with what it means to follow Jesus.
To challenge these is a risk.

The church is called to be a counter-cultural community – the Lordship of Jesus being at odds with the society around it.

We in all probability won't face imprisonment or threats of death but being publically shamed and socially reprimanded.

> True story.
> Felix was born in Cameroon but moved to live in the UK.
> While there he enrolled in a university course to be a social worker.
> During his time of study Felix did what most other young people do – he engaged in a *private* chat on social media where he expressed his Christian beliefs about sexuality and marriage. He did so in a polite and respectful way. There was the usual push back and some vitriol but Felix thought nothing of it.
> Several months later Felix received an email from the university informing him that they were investigating his Facebook comments. A panel chaired by an academic interviewed Felix; he had an opportunity to retract his views and issue an apology.
> He refused to do so arguing that he was simply articulating a historic, orthodox Biblical viewpoint in a respectful way in a private conversation.
> He was immediately dismissed from the course much to the applause of other students of campus.

The ramifications don't stop there. On every employment application Felix had to explicitly declare that he was expelled from the University of Sheffield for his views.
He had have left a job because he was being isolated and victimised because of his beliefs. Many friends now distance themselves from him.

There is a cost.
But is that it?

Do we simply suck it up, counting the cost?

Let's turn to 1 Peter 3 verse 9.
This is Peter, years later, encouraging other followers of Jesus who were suffering for their faith:

"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult.
On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.
For,

"Whoever among you would love life and see good days must keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech.
Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."
Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?
But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.
"Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened."

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.
Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.
But do this with ***gentleness and respect***, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."[2]

There is one phrase in here that speaks into creating resilience in a world where social reprimand can take its toll – did anyone pick it?

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord"

The reason why the threat of social reprimand of so powerful in our culture is because we so value our standing in the eyes of others.
It's about the public's estimation of my worth.

To set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts is to revere him above all others.

To let his estimation of you and love for you captivate your deepest affections. Let his love that took Jesus to the cross show you how much God loves and values, and esteems you.

It may this is closer to home than you'd like.
The threat of social reprimand isn't something happening for someone else, it's something happening to you – at home or at school in the workplace or even in social settings.

So I'd like to finish by praying for you this morning.

[2] See also Colossians 4:6: "Let your conversation be always ***full of grace***, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."