

One of the ideas which has been bandied around a lot in the last year is that of ‘taking back control’. The vote to leave the European Community was won in part by the argument that we are far too constrained by laws and standards dictated from Brussels, and we ought to be able to decide our rules for ourselves. The ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan has sprung from the perception that too many other nations and organisations have taken advantage of the generous American people. France, Germany and Holland all have elections this year, in which political groups which emphasise an inward-looking nationalism are attracting considerable support.

The idea of being ‘in control’ is a very attractive one, especially when it comes with the corollary of ‘and we’ll make the rules’. It’s a natural human tendency to want to be in control of ourselves and our own activities as far as we can, but for many people this then extends to a desire to control others. Sometimes this is necessary – think about bringing up children, or about safety, for example – but we all know what happens when control is taken to extremes.

It may surprise you to know that there was, and perhaps still is, a ‘British’ heresy. It was called after the British monk who articulated it in Rome in the early part of the fifth century. His name was Pelagius, and he was trying to reform the Roman church, which he felt was morally corrupt. He argued that because God has given humans complete free will, they can achieve salvation through their own efforts. They just have to turn deliberately away from all the temptations and opportunities for sin, and live righteous lives. God has also given us the templates for proper behaviour, the ten commandments and the example of Jesus, and all we have to do is to follow them rigorously. Centuries later this was paraphrased as ‘pulling yourself into heaven by your own bootstraps’. It must be the ultimate example of taking back control.

Pelagius promptly came up against Augustine. He held that humans were born with an inherent tendency to sin. This was like a disease; it interfered with free will, and people could not overcome it by themselves. They needed God’s grace to forgive their inevitable sins and ‘cure’ the disease, and lead them on the path to salvation. There were no qualifications or payment, no terms and conditions to receive grace. God gave it freely, and it was to be penitently and freely accepted.

The debate between Augustine, Pelagius and their followers got very heated and went on for a long time. Bishops were appealed to, councils convened, the Pelagians denounced as heretics, reprieved, and denounced again. Augustine’s doctrine of a humanity flawed by original sin, which could only obtain redemption by trusting in the grace of God, eventually became the accepted orthodoxy (and Augustine became a saint). But Pelagianism never quite went away. Many people still have that sneaking feeling that if they do enough good works they will earn their place in heaven.

Why is this important today? Because that is what Paul is writing about in our Epistle, and not just there. It is a constant theme which runs throughout his letters. ‘Works’ are not enough. The ten commandments and the law are not enough. The reward for work is earnings or wages, something that is automatically due to you. However much you trumpet your good deeds, God will not be impressed. (Not that you should not do them, but you do them because they are simply the right thing to do.) What God wants, and rewards, is faith. Faith to believe God’s promise, to hand over your life to him, to acknowledge where you’ve gone wrong and to ask for forgiveness and mercy. Paul uses Abraham as the example. Abraham wasn’t perfect, and he didn’t have the commandments or the law to follow (these were given to Moses much later). Read his story in

Genesis and you'll see that he did some pretty dubious things. But he had an absolute belief in God. When God gave him a command, he obeyed – even to the extent of being willing to sacrifice his son, the child miraculously born to Sarah as God had promised.

Abraham gave up control and handed his life to God. In return, God fulfilled his promise that Abraham would become the father of all nations. This means, of course, that Abraham is not just the father of the Jewish people. We are all his descendants, whatever our origin. Jesus came to bring a renewed promise of salvation to all the children of Abraham, and Paul's mission to the Gentiles was to help them realise that they were already included. Abraham's 'Yes!' to God, which was followed centuries later by Mary's 'Yes!' to God, has prepared the way for each of us to say our own 'Yes!' to God, and to let the Holy Spirit guide us on the path to salvation.