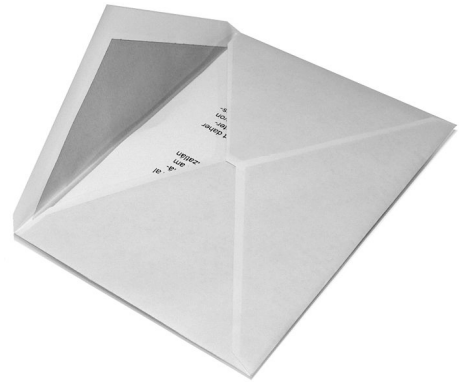


NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PROPER 4
SUNDAY 2 JUNE 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Galatians 1: 1-12



“I can’t believe your Fickleness!”

In the next couple of weeks we will be reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. By some this letter has been called the Magna Carta of Christian Freedom and has always been one of the central documents of faith for the Churches of the Reformation. It is a fairly short letter, written with passion. Paul does not mince his words, and is, in places, positively rude. It is clear conflict is raging, with Paul right in the thick of it, with no time to be nice, polite or even pastoral about it.

All that is to come is on the surface, right from the beginning, right from the first twelve verses as we read them this morning. For those who know how to listen, Paul engages in this conflict from the word go, without holding back.

But before we get to that: Let’s think about letters and letter writing first. How many of you are still actively engaged in letter writing? Or is it all emails nowadays, with letter writing reserved for special or formal occasions?

What are the typical ingredients that constitute a letter? What is the structure, what are the conventions most if not all of us would obey when writing letters?

Is there a difference between say personal and formal/business type letters? How would you be able to tell the difference?

What would you do if you wanted to express displeasure when writing a letter? Would you jump right in? Or are there other and better ways to go about it?

In ancient times, like in ours, there were certain conventions that were followed when people were writing a letter, but they were not the same as ours.

Ancient letters started with the name of the writer. Which is, when you think about it, very sensible. You’d know immediately who was writing to you instead of having to wait until the end, as tends to happen in our time. After the name of the writer came the name of the addressee, followed by a short greeting. Then the writer would give thanks for the good health of the person addressed. Which would then be followed by the main body of the letter. The letter was finished with personal news and greetings, and a farewell. A letter would often be dictated to a scribe. To authenticate a letter, the sender could, if he wanted to, insert a few words in his own hand before the farewell.

Paul, in all his letters, follows this general pattern. For instance, if we take the opening sentences of the letter to the Corinthians, we recognise the structure, stripped of some very Pauline additions:

- 1 *Paul,*
- 2 *To the church of God that is in Corinth,*
- 3 *Grace to you and peace*
- 4 *I give thanks to my God always for you.....*

By expanding that structure however, Paul, while obeying the customs of his time, gives his letters a distinctive Pauline, Christian twist, that makes them stand out very clearly from other letters at the time.

Here is the expanded version:

*1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,
2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,
together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and
ours:
3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ
Jesus,
5 for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—
6 just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—
7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

As you can see, he adds his faith credentials to his name, descriptions and characteristics of faith and community of the addressee, and - he changes the greeting in a significant way.

For the greeting he uses two words instead of the customary one: grace and peace. Grace, is the Greek Christian greeting which is a word play on the word *chairein* used outside the Christian community that just means “greetings”, and peace, a translation of the Hebrew greeting *shalom*. Probably a very conscious attempt on Paul’s part to connect to both ethnic streams in his congregations, gentile and Jews.

He also expands the thanksgiving to include not only the health of those he was writing to, but everything that was praiseworthy about them and their faith before God.

In the main body of the letter Paul usually gives some doctrinal teaching first, which is followed by advice on Christian living.

Personal news and greetings at the end of the letter would once again be expanded in comparison with other letter writings of his time to include news about other Churches and prominent individuals his addressees might be interested in. The letter would be finished with a blessing or exhortation in his own hand, followed by a farewell.

From what Paul adds in the way of his own credentials, the description of the recipient of the letter and what he gives thanks for, one can often get an idea of what the issues that are to follow in the main body of the text will be. But usually Paul waits with addressing these issues until after the customary opening paragraphs have been dealt with: Writer, addressee, greeting and thanksgiving.

Not so in the letter to the Galatians!

Which must have come as a right shock to them. What Paul does is exceedingly rude and it shows us, who know some of his other letters where he follows convention and is polite, that he must be very, and passionately, angry. So angry that he forgets all pleasantries and plunges right in. From the word go, he starts addressing the issues, not even waiting until he has given his name and the name of his addressee.

Paul, an apostle - sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead - and all the members of God’s family who are with me.....

Reading those first few lines, what do you think may be at stake for Paul? Exactly! Paul’s authority!

To the Churches of Galatia: Grace to you and Peace...

No nice lovely adjectives to describe those Galatians as he does in letters to other Churches, no trace of endearment or even polite pleasantries.

To the Churches of Galatia. GRRRRace to you and Peace.....

.....from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

And right there is the next issue that will be featuring big time in this letter: freedom. The Galatians weren't too sure about how far freedom would, or could stretch. Jesus died for it says Paul, just so you know!

And then? No thanksgiving! Nothing, not even the tiniest sliver of pleasant, polite good wishes. On the contrary. "I am astonished you are so fickle!" followed by a passionate denunciation of some who apparently have succeeded in turning the good folk in Galatia from the gospel Paul has preached, to something that goes completely against his teachings. Fire and brimstone are called down upon them. Even after two thousand years one can still feel the heat behind the words.

So what has happened? What is it that gets Paul so incredibly excited?

Well, we don't know, but we can make an educated guess from what Paul writes in the rest of this letter, as well as from some of the things we know from what Luke writes in Acts about the history of early Christianity.

It was all about the question, could one be a full member of the Christian community without becoming a member of the Jewish synagogue first? If, and to what degree, the Jewish laws and traditions were still applicable to Christians. Around the year 50 a council held in Jerusalem decided that gentiles could join the new faith without having to subject themselves to circumcision, dietary laws or the keeping of Jewish Holy Days, but that they had to be conscious of the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters when they were together. For a long time after that there were still those who maintained that Christians who kept the Mosaic laws were better Christians than those who didn't.

It looks like, since the Galatians first received the gospel from Paul, others have come and told them that Paul had only given them half the story. That more was needed from them to participate fully in the faith than Paul had told them. That they'd be better Christians if they followed the Mosaic law. And that they'd embraced this new teaching.

Galatianism is something Christians of every age have struggled with, right up until the present day. Somehow it is much easier to feel one has to work to belong, to have clear rules to adhere to and clear boundaries to define our community than boundless freedom and fuzzy definitions of who is in and who is out. We crave certainty, and clarity, and we love to feel we can "earn" our "way in", our status, our place in a community. This applies to any community, but also the Church.

Over the centuries there have been many characteristics to define who was "in" and who was "out" where the Church has been concerned: food, drink, sexual practices, dress, custom, and this still goes on.

Wouldn't you agree that those who come to worship every Sunday are just that tiny little bit more "Christian" than those who don't? Those who pray for their meals just a little more Christian than those who don't? Those who keep the sabbath, to a certain degree, more committed, closer to God, closer to Christ?

It's hard not to think in that way! Because where would we be if we let go of the idea that attendance on a Sunday, that participation during the week, that involvement in the work of the Church, that regular and public praying is at least part of what defines a good Christian?

As we will see, Paul does not agree, and very passionately so. He feels betrayed, and what is worse, he feels the core message of the gospel is being betrayed. While like us, the Galatians struggle with the gospel of radical love and freedom Paul preaches. So they try to discredit his message, they try to discredit his authority, they try to argue otherwise. And from what we can gather from Paul's side of the conversation, they are not too easily convinced.

Let's see what we will gain from listening to that conversation in the next couple of weeks for our own life and faith. Our own struggle with freedom, and authority, and our relationship to tradition, and see if we can glean some deeper insight into the gospel for our life and times. Amen.