

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 9 JUNE 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Psalm 30, Galatians 1:11-24, Isaiah 49:1-6

“Called?”

Last week we read the first few verses of Paul’s letter to the Galatians and met an angry and passionate Paul doing away with the usual niceties and the normal letter writing conventions of his time to express his disappointment and distress about the direction the Galatians had taken.

As we saw, the NRSV translation puts it mildly when it says: I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel..... , with the more contemporary language of The Message a bit closer to the mark: I can t believe your fickleness!

In today’s reading Paul, before he engages in any debate about the different gospel and his own, starts with giving his credentials.

His gospel he tells them, has not come from any human authority, tradition or school. It has come straight from the Lord, Jesus Christ.

He goes on to tell them his story. How he, who persecuted Christians with the same passion and fervor he now shows for promoting the gospel, was called into the service of that same message he had been so determined to destroy.

That he realised that somehow, God had had an eye on him, even while he was heading in the opposite direction.

That he had been destined to become an apostle, even from before he was born. How he experienced a spectacular conversion, followed by a time away in the regions of Syria and Cilicia, only to return to Jerusalem after three years to get information from Peter. That he also met, briefly, James, the brother of the Lord at that time, and how their response was to recognise and worship God because of him.

The way Paul tells his story echoes the stories of the Old Testament prophets and their experience and sense of call. It should NOT be read as the story of a religious fanatic who has changed allegiance, too full of himself to submit himself to the wisdom of the wider Church. But, it could easily be read that way, and has been read that way, right from the word go.

From what we gather from this letter, but also from how the story in Acts is told, we can safely assume there were people who were saying, Who does he think he is? He didn’t even meet Jesus in the flesh, he hasn’t come to the original twelve to be taught, he hasn’t even been part of one of our existing congregations to familiarise himself with the ethics and ethos of our Church before he hit the road to share the message (our message) with others! So who does he think he is?

From what he says in his introduction Paul has come to see himself as a prophet. Someone who has been called, from before he was born, destined by God to do a job. And that no matter what the rest of the world may think or feel about it, his call, this understanding of what needs to be done, is so strong it overrules everything else.

For us now it is only natural that the gospel was opened up to non-Jews without them having to convert to Judaism before they became Christians. But at the time that was not at all obvious. The Mother Church in Jerusalem was still very much a Jewish sub-sect, living according to Jewish law and tradition.

As Jesus had done.

And where Jesus had welcomed some individuals into his movement from the outside, shortly after his death the movement wasn't prepared for a large influx of others who had no connections to the Jewish faith, other than that they found themselves wanting to follow this Jewish Rabbi.

I don't think we can underestimate how revolutionary Paul opening the doors for everyone would have felt to them. And how threatening it would have been.

Let them in, without circumcision, without dietary regulations, without applying purity laws, without a thorough introduction to the scriptures and traditions of the faith they were, and Jesus was, part of? No way!

It was probably a bit like saying people can be part of the Church without ever getting near the building, without attending worship, or knowing the hymns, or saying the prayers, or practicing a daily spiritual discipline, or doing away with other things we have come to believe mark a Christian life, but worse.

And who was Paul to come up with this idea anyway? So off they go, in small groups, from the Mother Church, to set to rights those who Paul has shared his gospel with. To tell them there is a little bit more to faith than just an unconditional and free for all love fest.

So, who does Paul think he is to come up with this idea? What we know is that on the way to Damascus his life is turned around. From someone who knew the Jewish law and traditions from the inside out, and was prepared to commit murder to defend them, he changes into someone who lets go of all of that. What he says happened is that he met Jesus.

For us, twenty-first century people, who reek as much of religious imagination gone wild, and possible underlying mental health issues as it did then. And Paul knows it. A student of Gamaliel, one of the greatest Jewish teachers of his time, he must have been a highly functional, intelligent individual. Something which is confirmed by the correspondence he left behind. Two thousand years on and we're still reading it and puzzling over it!

I imagine that that is exactly why he didn't turn around and present himself at the Mother Church in Jerusalem to be taught by the original twelve but disappeared into the wildernesses of Syria and Silicia for three years! He would have needed time to think, time to come to terms with this change of track, and most probably, time to come to terms with the violence he has committed in the name of his previous conviction. Only after he has worked through these issues does he seek out Peter to gather some information .

What the nature of that information was is not clear, but Paul emphasises he didn't stay long enough for a complete Christian leadership training and that his conversion had been greeted with recognition and joyful thanksgiving by Peter and James.

So how is it possible that Paul so confidently and radically diverted from the path of others who had been much closer to Jesus? Sure enough, Acts tells us Peter had also started to make connections with non-Jews and began to accept them as followers of Christ. But not in the radical way Paul did!

Perhaps it is because Paul was so deeply at home with the Jewish traditions and the scriptures that he could see and formulate what others could not: That a law abiding Christian teaching was a contradiction in terms. We'll come to that part later in the letter. For now, to start with however, we see Paul did not come

up with a rationale, with dogma and a theological underpinning of his views and practices. He came up with a story. His story.

A story that tells of a shocking, unexpected and total change of direction from violent destructive hate to all embracing, unconditional love and forgiveness. Not because he had a change of mind, not because he was convinced by others he was on the wrong track, but because he meets the living Lord Jesus Christ. Discovering, to his utter surprise, Christ alive in him. Not for him, or to him, but in him.

And that's what Paul's gospel is about, and that's why he can't tolerate another. Finding Jesus alive in him he realises all the other stuff, all the other religious rules and regulations people may adopt as part of their faith will only take away from the earth shattering truth that finding Jesus alive in you is enough.

The law, the tradition, his Jewish faith, had, obviously, not done it for Paul. On the contrary, it had taken him away from the truth and set him on the terrible course of persecution and violence. Finding Jesus obstructing this path is not a head thing, but a heart thing, a soul thing that changes his perspective completely.

Imagine the guilt and the agony he must have felt, earnest, convinced he was doing the right thing in his murderous zeal, he finds himself turned around to love, and what must have been worse, love that accepted him and somehow helped him forgive himself for what he had done.

That's pretty powerful stuff, and the gospel he starts to preach is filled with that awareness of immense grace that accepts even the worst sinner and invites him to be part of God's plan. Even worse: for that terrible sinner to realise that even when he was in the middle of his murderous rampage, God was loving and working on him.

That's what has changed Paul so deeply, and that is what he is determined to share with others. He knows from experience that nothing but the love of God can and will save us. Even the greatest sinners amongst us. No works or piety can get you there, only finding the living Christ alive in you. So no to circumcision, dietary laws, tradition, they are all circumstantial, but not essential.

And he recognises in himself, from the tradition, from the scriptures he has been steeped in from the womb, that call that went out to the prophets of old to stand up and witness to a truth that is deeper than human tradition or conviction could ever cover: That we are invited to live by grace alone. That there are no other conditions than to allow Christ in and live his life in ours.

Paul's of course was a very spectacular way of discovering this truth. Perhaps because he was more stubborn and full of himself than most of us, or perhaps because it would take an almighty amount of conviction and energy to do what he did after he changed direction: Go out, tell the nations about Christ and argue his Jewish brothers and sisters out of their comfort zone into a new frame of mind at the same time.

For most of us it isn't that spectacular, and may take longer than three years in the wilderness to come to terms with.

I know it has taken me all my life, and that I am still not there yet. Christ alive in me? Me! No way! I'd rather work hard at bringing the Kingdom about myself than accept that God has called me as I am, not to work hard, but to know myself loved, warts and all. And that Christ longs to live in me, so I can be what God has imagined me to be from before I was born: someone who is free to live and to love others.

I've been close enough to have experienced whiffs of what that may be like. To be free of the existential angst of thinking you are simply not good enough, need to work harder at it, that the world depends on you doing the right thing, that faith is nothing but a set of rules we need to live by to keep the world from falling apart.

And at times I have met others, in whom I have met the living Christ, looking out at me through their eyes, healing me through their love. I have discovered that it still happens! And the only thing we need to do is let the living Jesus keep us on track. The track of love.

Reflecting on the passage for this morning one of the speakers and preachers I heard in Nashville came to mind. He, in a similar but different way than Paul has found his life turned from going down a path of violence and bitterness to a life where the living Christ is at work in many different ways. I found an interview with him on the internet I'd like to share with you now. Because he inspired me, and because it shows that Jesus still works miracles in people's lives. Turning tears into dancing and sadness into joy (Psalm 30). Amen.