

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 16 JUNE 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Galatians 2: 11-24, Psalm 32.

“By Grace Alone”

As we have seen in the last two weeks, Paul’s letter to the Galatians begins with a defense of his apostolic authority, which has been contested by the teachers who come after him after he has left Galatia. Paul narrates his earlier life of violence against the message he is now so passionately positive about. According to Paul he received a ‘revelation’ (1:12) of Jesus and a call in the manner of the prophets of old to turn his life and his allegiance around.

He takes the gospel to the gentiles, inviting them into the faith without the requirement of circumcision, abiding by Jewish dietary or purity laws, or the keeping of Jewish holy days. This, it seems, did not meet with the approval of others in the early Church and a conflict arises. A conflict that basically boils down to the question “do Gentiles have to become Jewish first before they can be Christians?”. Is there anything more “to do” after you come to faith in Jesus, or is that it?

I am sure many of you will have heard a plethora of sermons on “by grace alone” in your life time. And I am equally sure you have taken those sermons to heart. Making most of us very aware that we “can’t work our way into heaven” and that we are all acceptable in God’s loving sight, even the worst sinners amongst us, as long as.....

And that is, I think, where the rubber hits the road. Because I think most of us will be able to complete that sentence with one, two or more conditions that will need to be met before one is truly acceptable. True repentance for one, or “showing signs of a Christian life” for another, or trying, hard, to follow in Christ’s footsteps by living a righteous life, or participating in the life of the Church, or at least be positive about the ethos of the Church..... What else?

The way I read Paul, what he says is that there is no “as long as”. There is no “Believe in Jesus Christ and....”. There is just love.

Mulling all of that over and remembering how many times over the last thirty years I have failed preaching on this, I wondered: How does this apply to Adrian Bayley, whose life of terrible violence came to light this week? How does it apply to rape and murder and evil intent? How does grace come into that?

It also brought back to me a very personal story of a woman who grew up like Adrian Bayley did, physically and sexually abused, to end up filled with aggression and self loathing. Rather than lash out at others, she decided to turn the murderous rage she felt onto herself, and now manages to live “a normal life” with her body covered in scars from occasional bouts of self harm in places she manages to keep hidden from the world, convinced this is what Christ asks her to do.

What on earth does the gospel Paul brings mean for them?

As I told you last week, and as I want to emphasise again this week: We are not to think too lightly about what Paul did, or what he consequently expected the Church to do.

We are dealing with a murderer here. A man who not only contemplated using violence against innocent people, but who actually did use violence to suppress and persecute. He was, in his own words, out to annihilate. Nothing more, nothing less. And those who felt he wasn’t to be let out on bail after his

“revelation”, and certainly not to be let loose on new converts without being checked up on had a point. To hear Paul’s gospel I think it is essential to face and acknowledge that this was no nice, softly spoken, western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic, or W.E.I.R.D, Christian like we are. Not after his conversion, but certainly not before it. There was rage there, and violence, and bloody conviction, and passion.

It is that murderously violent man that turns around and starts singing to a totally different tune, preaching a totally different gospel. The gospel of free grace.

Ok, I hope I got that through to you. Paul, violent, aggressive, unpleasant, obnoxious, arrogant Paul. Someone we would most probably, (most definitely!), not want near our Church or Church Council. Because he would mean trouble, conflict, debate of a kind we generally avoid and abhor. And, with a past we would not want discussed in public.

It is this Paul who refuses to go away, has refused to go away for over two thousand years. And people have hated him for it. He not only is violent, he evokes violence.

According to the picture Luke paints in Acts, and from what Paul tells us himself, Paul’s work amongst the gentiles caused tension.

The Church in Jerusalem was going well. Slowly weaving their way forward, listening to every voice, trying to accommodate differences, respecting people’s denominational backgrounds, taking every context into account they’d come to a place of reasonable harmony and peace, that moved forward at a snail’s pace to make sure nobody was left behind. Which to some of us may sound a bit like some of the reports we receive from Synod or Presbytery: That brutal clashes and theological rifts are held in mutual consensus with all the love and understanding members can muster, and more. Gathering in prayer and faith, trying to give shape to the gospel in a world that is alien to it.

Paul, time and again, we see crashing into that, with his message of free grace, with his passion, his personal zeal, his emotion, his irrational reason. He calls Peter a hypocrite for not taking a stance on the law-abiding, non law-abiding Christian dispute. One moment he is eating with gentiles, the next moment he is sucking up to James, the brother of the Lord, one of the dominant figures in the circumcision faction. He exposes the superiority circumcised Christians feel over against non-circumcised Christians. He exposes piety on the inside that undermines the gospel more than any attack from the outside could ever do. He exposes underlying issues nobody wants to talk about. Issues of inequality, of hypocrisy, of make believe, of what is really important and essential to faith and what is not. Of the illusion that if we only got it right, all would be well with the world.

Faith in Jesus Christ AND a Jewish lifestyle will keep you secure for this life and the next, and why not? Jesus lived that way didn’t he? And what harm can it do? We want the world to see that faith makes a difference don’t we?

God sets us right says Paul. And that is our salvation. Salvation, faith, security, begins with an act of God, not with us. Not with anything we can say or do. Because whatever we say or do, we will never be perfect, or be able to bring the world around us to perfection. What God did in Christ, what Christ’s life, death and resurrection showed us, is that God does not stop where that imperfection gets the better of righteousness, of love, of justice, of peace.

What made the difference with Jesus was not his righteous life. In itself that would not have made any difference. There are many others who live righteous lives, do justice, bring love and peace to the world, and are killed for it. What makes the difference is that God this time showed that violence and murder are not, in God’s book, the end of the story. Not of Jesus’ story and not of any story, not of Paul’s story.

What Paul says is this: Because of Jesus’ story, because of my story, we now know that God’s grace does not finish where violence and murder have taken over. But that somehow God’s grace can turn it around,

turn it on its head, without any human help or support whatsoever. On the contrary, in my life, in Jesus' life, the only thing that could and did turn things around, was God's love and grace intervening in the murderous violent intent on annihilation that was raging. Unconditionally. God didn't ask for repentance from the perpetrators, God did not even ask for repentance from me, Paul, before he called me into his service. Into his righteousness.

Before Christ started to live in me.

Christ's life showed me, Paul, how, and enabled me, Paul, to rise with him from the nightmare of violence and death to a new and different life that knows from the inside out, because it has experienced it, how love can conquer that murderous rage and destructive violence that some of us live with or encounter in life.

How that applies to Adrian Bayley who turned his inner rage onto the world around him, or to that woman covered in the scars of self loathing and self-hate that tries to keep it inside herself? I don't know, but I've got an inkling that it does.

That somehow it is important to keep faith that a life lived in violence and hate does not spell the end of everything. That it does not necessarily mean there will be more violence, more hate, more bitterness as a result of it. But that resurrection is possible.

Not because of what we can do or be, because we can "work it away" with zeal and dedication, but because God will, in the end, not let violence and hatred win the day. Because God will, in his grace, draw people into his righteousness, calling them from violence to love, from hatred to justice and peace. Because faith in Christ is faith in a God who will not let go, even where murderous rage and violent intent take over. Unconditionally. Without depending on our help or good behaviour. Amen.