

Galatians week 4

Gal 2:11-13, 3:1-14 (and Luke 3:28-25)

If I were to ask you to define 'culture' what would you say? (Anyone want to have a go?)

Or perhaps if I asked you to describe the 'culture' here at St John's, what sort of things would come to mind?

Some definitions:

Dictionary of Modern Sociology *"The total, generally organised way of life, including values, norms, institutions, and artefacts, that is passed on from generation to generation by learning alone."*

Dictionary of Sociology: *"That part of the total repertoire of human action (and its products), which is socially, as opposed to genetically, transmitted."*

Geertz *"The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."*

But a definition I really like, and which is easier to understand is this:

"The way we do things around here."

So what matters to us here at St John's? What are the things that are part of our culture? (I don't know them yet!)

One way we discover what matters to us is when people of a different culture come and invade ours. So think for a moment what happens here when there is a baptism, and a large number of people come who aren't regulars. What are some of the things that irritate, or wind us up?

Or when a new priest arrives, and they don't do things quite as we might expect. I am probably doing things that grate on you, without even knowing it.

Keep those thoughts in mind as we look at the passages in Galatians.

Because what we see here is a clash of cultures. Two groups of Christians but from completely different backgrounds.

For Jewish Christians their cultural background had included obedience to the Law, the Torah. All their lives they had obeyed the commands of God in the Old Testament, and had kept themselves ritually pure, and set apart from non-Jews. Boys were circumcised at eight days old as a sign of belonging to the

people of God, and they kept numerous festivals. For the most part Jews looked down on Gentiles as unclean, and they would certainly never have eaten with them or entered their homes. It was like a religious apartheid. Jews simply didn't associate with Gentiles.

Gentiles Christians, on the other hand, had not grown up steeped in the law. Most had worshipped numerous pagan gods, sacrificed to them, visited their temples. They weren't circumcised. They had a completely different way of doing things.

Jews and Gentiles really inhabited different planets. And yet God was building a church that included all of them.

And he had revealed that to Peter. Peter – or Cephas as he is called in this passage – was a Jewish Christian. In Chapter 10 of Acts, we read how he received a revelation from God. He had had a vision of large sheet being let down from heaven full of animals normally forbidden food for Jews, but he heard a voice saying 'Kill and eat!' His kneejerk reaction is, "Never!" But a voice says, "What God has made clean you must not call profane."

Peter is then told to speak to Cornelius, a Gentile, and in response to what God has shown him, he breaks all the normal cultural taboos by going into Cornelius's home. All Cornelius family become Christians, and receive the Holy Spirit, and are baptised. Peter then has to explain this to the rest of the church, and they conclude that this is a move of God. It is God at work, bringing Gentiles into the kingdom. And they celebrate.

But from this passage in Galatians, Peter had clearly backtracked, at least in his behaviour. In Ch 2V11 Paul says it had been Peter's regular custom to eat with Gentiles, but he had then drawn back and separated himself from them again. Why? Because he had had an encounter with the 'Circumcision group', the Jewish Christians who were adamant that Gentiles believers needed to be circumcised and follow the Old Testament law in order to be saved and put right with God. As a result, and because of fear of that group, Peter had separated himself off from Gentiles again.

And Paul is livid about this! He says he opposed Peter to his face, because he was being a hypocrite, and people were being led astray because of it.

Just as these Galatians were, and he is cross with them, too! "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you!"

He was upset with the Galatian Christians for ditching the truth that we are saved solely by grace, by believing Jesus died for them, and were instead now believing that in order to be saved they also needed to obey the Old Testament Law. A sort of 'faith plus works' gospel.

Paul says that's not true:

2V 16 "we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no-one will be justified by the works of the law."

Works can never save us. We are saved by grace. That's what we looked at last week. We are saved, and we receive the Spirit, when we BELIEVE in Jesus, not by obeying the law, or by any good works.

The Galatians had believed this. They had put their faith in Jesus. They had started their new Christians lives by being filled with the Spirit, dying to their old way of life, and living for God. But like Peter, they were reverting back to an old way of doing things based on the law.

Paul says that's like going back to prison.

When we live by faith, empowered and guided by the Spirit, we find freedom.

How is any of this relevant to us, here in Caversham, today?

Think back to the question I asked about culture.

As Christians here at St John's, we believe Jesus died for our sins. But we also have a 'way of doing things round here', quite possibly it's the way we have done things for many years. All churches have a culture, often learned from previous generations, and we tend to think our way of doing things is the right way of doing things!

The danger comes when we begin to think, often subconsciously, that newcomers have to convert to our culture as well as believe in Jesus.

Yesterday I was at the Partnership for Missional Church training day, and one of the leaders said that a church member once said to him that baptism families needed to "learn church etiquette".

In other words, they should become like us, and behave like we do, in order to be welcome in our church.

But church etiquette is secondary to faith in Jesus. And if we are really going to connect with our community, we need to ask ourselves some questions:

How does our culture need to change in order for people from a different culture to feel welcome here?

Do we understand the culture of our surrounding community well enough to be able to connect with it?

Does the way we do things around here make it easier, or harder for people in our community to discover that Jesus loves them?

Are we willing to sacrifice some of the cultural things that are precious to us, in order that the community around us can discover Jesus?

These are big questions, uncomfortable questions.

They are the kind of questions the PMC process is encouraging us to ask.

And it can seem scary, as most of us don't like change much.

What we have to remember is that God is right here in the midst of us. He loves us, and he has a good plan for us, and for St John's.

I passionately believe that God wants this church to thrive, to become a vibrant, confident, flourishing community that brings the life and fragrance of Jesus to this part of Caversham. But for that to happen I think we will all need to be prayerfully asking him, "Lord, show us how you see us, and how we need to change to become the church you are calling us to be. Free us from those things that hinder our mission. Help us to hear your voice, to trust you, and to follow you, wherever you lead, and whatever sacrifices you call us to make."

Finish - prayer we pray before we Dwell in the Word

Loving God

Though our destination is not yet clear,
May we trust in your graceful promises;
Though we are uncertain of ourselves,
May we be rooted in your loving regard;
Though our attention is inclined to wander,
May we hear the things you are saying;
Though we often neglect your influence,
May we be convicted of your power to change,
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen