

## Sermon

### Sermon - Jesus Changes Everything

About this time last year, some of you may remember that we had a whole-book preaching series on the Gospel According to Mark. This year we wanted to do a follow-up series, so how do you follow Jesus and the Gospel? From Jesus proclaiming the good News of the Kingdom, in words and – especially – in deeds, by healing the sick and accepting the rejected, through to the end where the women are afraid to tell others about Jesus' resurrection, Mark was a story of Good News and of God's Kingdom growing in spite of human fallibility.

But how does that Good News work out in practice? What happens when small groups of Jesus' followers have the responsibility for living out, in their own lives and communities, love of God, love of neighbour, and love for one another? Perhaps unsurprisingly human fallibility meant it didn't really go to plan; the result was that St Paul wrote a series of letters giving guidance, then but also now, on what it means to be Jesus' followers in God's family. The first letter Paul wrote was to newly planted churches in the Roman province of Galatia. Hopefully the map is clear enough to get an idea of the geography.

In Galatians Paul takes his readers/listeners through what it means to be God's people, the heart and hands, feet and voices of Jesus in their localities; and he helps them face up to the need for a change of heart as they see God at work in their changing world. Over the next several weeks, we will be following Paul together on that journey, hopefully discovering for ourselves what the Gospel of Jesus means in our church communities here in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Caversham.

One challenge with reading Galatians is that its language, at least in its English translation, is more than a little opaque. The structure of Paul's arguments, and his sentences, suffers from being a very Jewish worldview, and argument style, expressed originally in Greek rhetoric, then translated fairly brutally into English. But if you can cut through that the letter actually has a nice straightforward structure and some clear and important themes. Which is the benefit of a preaching series.

The biggest theme in Galatians carries on from the Gospels: the tendency of people, especially religious people, to exclude others, maybe based on their race, maybe their upbringing, often their supposed worthiness, whatever. As we saw last year, Jesus sought out and welcomed all sorts of outcasts, all sorts of unsuitable and inappropriate people. In Jesus there is no 'us & them', no-one is excluded, God's welcome is universal. You can see the other main themes on the sheet, and will, no doubt, have a chance to hear much more about them in the weeks ahead.

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This week is the introduction to this series on Galatians, so you may be wondering why none of the readings we just heard actually came from Galatians. The reason is that to understand Galatians you have to understand the context, and the roots of the issues Paul addresses in his letter lie in this story about the church at Antioch.

The story begins about 14 years after Pentecost, after followers of Jesus had been spreading throughout the Jewish communities of the Eastern Mediterranean.

It can be easy to forget, today, that Jesus was a Jew, and the early disciples were all Jews, as were the vast majority of his early followers. As such they shared a common religious background – one which separated them from people around them. They ‘knew how to behave’ in religious meetings, and they shared common assumptions about how God’s people should live their lives.

As we heard in today’s readings, at a place called Antioch (see map) the church started to attract outsiders, people who were different, who didn’t know how to behave, who had no idea (supposedly) of what it meant to be God’s people. That was okay as long as they learnt to conform, but when there are a lot of them they are more likely to question, and to challenge, the “way we do things here”.

So they call in Barnabas, the ‘people person’, and he calls in Paul, the ‘zealous Jew’ (and theology expert). And Paul tells them that Jesus accepts everyone. Your ethnicity and your background don’t matter. What’s even more confusing is that he says the old signs of being God’s people – circumcision and following *Torah*, Jewish Law, the Law of Moses – are no longer required in Jesus.

Paul is going too far! This was against both their tradition and their Scripture. Even worse he then goes on a ‘missionary journey’ - along the *Via Sebaste*, the Emperor’s Road, in the Roman province of Galatia - and he founds new churches: ***mixed*** churches, Jews and non-Jews together, from their very formation! And he upsets a lot of religious people in the process.

So the pushback begins, zealous Jewish Christians proclaim the primacy of Scripture, and the whole mess ends up being taken to Jerusalem. In the meantime some of those zealous Jews are also visiting the mixed churches that Paul had founded “putting them right” on how they should live as God’s people.

So Paul writes a letter ...

I wonder if any of that sounds familiar? Arguments about what God wants, division and exclusion based on externals, struggles to reconcile God’s Spirit at work with

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our traditions and understandings of Scripture? This letter is for the churches in Caversham as much as for those of Galatia.

Now, surely as nice Caversham churches we all want to welcome new people into our congregations, don't we? But how far are we aware of our own religious expectations, our shared assumptions and standards of behaviour? If a large group of people came to our church who were different, who behaved differently and who demanded different things, how long would our welcome last, I wonder.

Then there's the blatant xenophobia of our press, with their outspoken 'us and them' prejudices and their vilification of outsiders, or people who fall short. People buy these papers, even in Caversham, so how do **we** build bridges, rather than helping construct walls (as Pope Francis recently put it)? Especially in the unedifying face of the forthcoming referendum.

Essentially Galatians is about living in a world which wants to split people up into us and them, insiders and outsiders, neighbours and aliens. This was how things were two thousand years ago and it is how things are today. In such a society Jesus' followers are called to a different way: to offer a radically open welcome to all, however different, because Jesus died for all, and because God accepts all as His people in Jesus the Messiah. I wonder: if you're a regular churchgoer, what does this welcome look like in your church? If you're more of an occasional visitor, how does the welcome you receive feel?

One of the questions coming out of PMC, Partnership for Missional Church, this year has been how we go beyond just a smile and a greeting when people visit our churches. How can we move from just 'being nice' to visitors onto starting to build relationships with them? That would take time, of course, so how could we create opportunities to take things deeper? Should we encourage them to come back to us, could we maybe meet them on 'their territory', is there neutral ground?

I keep hearing that "people don't like change", especially in churches. I'm not sure that is necessarily totally true: in my experience of Caversham churches, it seems to vary depending in circumstances and approach. But I am sure that Jesus changes things. He changes situations, he changes people, he is changing the world, and, in the meantime, he walks by our side to bring us through all that life throws at us.

You only have to read the papers or watch the news to see that, in many ways, the world is in a mess and needs to change. You only have to spend some time looking at what is happening in our three churches to see that, in many ways, we have got into a mess and we need to change. And you just need to meet a range of people

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around Caversham to recognise that there are a lot of people in trouble of various kinds in our neighbourhood. Jesus changes everything: we know that, now is time to live it and to demonstrate to our neighbours the reality of **his** risen life in **our** words and deeds. We are called to be messengers for Jesus and we have a message of grace to carry ...

### **Reflection & Prayer:**

Saul of Tarsus was once staunchly committed to maintaining the boundary between those who were 'inside' and those who were 'outside'. He was a zealous defender of the letter of the law and a persecutor of the Church. Until, that is, he met Jesus on the Damascus road – then everything changed!

Are we prepared for our encounter with Jesus to challenge us, and possibly to radically change us?

*Father, in these weeks after Trinity, help us to see Jesus and, as we see him, be deeply changed, as you changed Paul. Help us to become people who pray and work against unjust exclusion and against all walls that separate your people in your Church and in our society. Amen.*

*Rowan Williams*