

Galatians sermon series week 7

10/07/16 18:30 Evensong St Peter

We've learnt in the last couple of weeks something important about freedom. Political freedom, as voted for in the referendum, doesn't mean the absence of encumbrances, but requires new and perhaps harder things of us. Freedom is not separation from relationships, but a feature of relationships. And for the Christian that is found to be the most true in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Which begs the questions at the heart of this part of Paul's letter to the Galatians: What kind of relationships follow from (and create the possibilities for) Christian freedom? Paul's brief answer, as we shall see, is that Christian relationships ought to be shaped for love of neighbour. That love of neighbour is, of course, not Paul's idea. It is emphasised in Jewish Law in the book of Leviticus, which Jesus picks up in Matthew's Gospel. Neighbour love lies behind what is called the Golden Rule, found in many of the world's major religions: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

To emphasise this love, Paul contrasts "desires of the flesh" and "fruit of the Spirit". For each he lists behaviour which emphasise what he is talking about. Each list may make us squirm in our seats as types of behaviour are listed to which we feel we fall prey to, or which set us impossibly high standards that we cannot keep. It is important for us to consider that Paul does not seek to separate these behaviours into material 'bad', and spiritual 'good' lists. Works of the flesh includes both material desires (fornication, drunkenness) and spiritual ones (idolatry, sorcery). The fruit of the Spirit enriches not only our spiritual lives but our relationship with the stuff of the world. The opposition between the Work of the flesh and Fruits of the Spirit is one of values and attitude, not of intrinsic difference.

For St Paul's problem with the flesh is not that it desires but that its desires are disordered. It wants the wrong things, or wants good things in the wrong way - usually too much or too little. Wanting sexual gratification and satisfaction leads us to relationships not born out of love. Wanting contact with the Divine, we pursue idols. Paul is asking us to see that disordered desires enslave us to our passions and destroy community. Paul's list of Words of the Flesh is similar to others floating around in the Greco-Roman world at the time. But for Paul the appropriate response to disordered desire is neither the rejection of desire nor surrender to it. Instead, it is to desire properly, which is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit, who also desires.

How much our contemporary culture needs to learn from this? We can find examples around us of a stoic refusal to desire - an acceptance all too often of second best; a lack of desire for good education in some families. And also the libertarian refusal to have our desires reshaped or capped - the "I can do what I want with no regard for anyone else" culture of liberal capitalism.

So Paul's answer is to live in the Fruit of the Spirit. Not just to be guided by the Spirit, but to be shaped by Spirit to become people of the Fruit. For it is in inhabiting the Fruit of the Spirit that our lives are shaped as God wants them. We become the kind of neighbours that our world needs, and in doing so we set an example to others to do the same.

This week as the Chilcot report was published, the various people affected by that report tried to get their responses in quickly. Most waited for was Tony Blair. If you saw the lengthy interview with him, it seemed his plan was to admit errors, but not to renege on his decision to go war or to remove Saddam Hussain. For him it seems, the end justified the means. And perhaps that is why so many people are angry.

For, in Christian terms, it is Spirit of God gradually ripening the Fruit of the Spirit in us, that changes us to be the people God wants us to be. It is the means that are all important. But we

must learn to develop those Fruit - to be people of joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That is no easy list. Like me you perhaps fail at them most days. But in the Spirit we can keep trying to get better. And in doing so our community and our society improves as we improve.

In these turbulent times, of political, economic and social change, let us pray that we might grow in the Fruit of God's Spirit, and to show our world of a better way to live.