**8 September 2013 Christ Church**

**Called by God**

**Galatians 1:11-24**

1. **How to kill an idea**

Many people have discovered to their cost within an organisation that what seems like a good idea to them can often get lost and forgotten, before they realise it. It seems that Paul was experiencing something similar in the church in Galatia. He had brought the gospel of Jesus to the church, but now he had heard that there were some people who were attempting to turn the Galatian church away from the gospel Paul had brought and given them an alternative gospel.

One way they may have tried was simply to ignore it. Pretend it just hadn’t been mentioned. If you give it no fuel to grow then it will die. But apparently that was not happening in Galatia so different approaches were needed.

It certainly seems that they had criticised the gospel. They had told the Galatians that Paul had got it wrong. Later in the letter Paul would go into considerable detail to show that the gospel he had brought was the right one, but he would have to put up a robust defence against people who probably were making out that they knew better than him.

They could analyse the gospel Paul had brought. Go into it in depth, on the basis that if you probe deep enough you will expose the weak points. But Paul would counter this by lambasting the arguments put forward by his opponents demonstrating that theirs would not hold water.

They had tried changing the gospel. It seems that Paul’s opponents were telling the Galatians that what Paul had told them was fine as far as it went, but there was more to it. In v7 he says, *‘Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.’*

If all else fails, then shoot the messenger. Tell the church that Paul’s credentials are lacking, perhaps that he had not met Jesus himself (something that Paul would deny) whereas what they were telling the Galatians had come from some of Jesus own disciples, who had been with him for the 3 years of his ministry.

It is all very well for this to happen when it is just an idea that is at stake. But this is the gospel we are talking about here. You can’t play with that. And when we think about it the outcome of the struggle between Paul and his opponents in Galatia could have changed the whole of Christian history and we could have been taught a gospel that was not just wrong but, even worse, distorted.

So Paul in his letter vigorously defends the Gospel against those who were out to destroy it. In verses 11-24 he does this by setting out what is the source or authority of the gospel – that it is of God not of men or a man; then he sets out the nature of the gospel – that it is a gospel of grace. And then he sets out the consequences of the gospel – that it changes people’s lives.

1. **The Gospel is of God**

The first thing Paul tells us is that the source, the authority for the gospel he brought to the Galatians is God himself. He does this by setting out his own credentials. In the very first verse of the letter he wrote *‘Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.*’ So from the very start of the gospel he is setting out his authority. Then in verses 11 and 12 he writes, ‘*I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.*’ And as he reminds the Galatians how he came to faith he tells them in vv 16-17, *‘my immediate response was not to consult any human being.  I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia.’* This is why any attempt to give an alternative gospel or to make changes in the gospel Paul brought Paul sees as being no alternative. For him, the end result is no gospel at all. It would no longer be the gospel as God intended, it would be changed to a gospel of men.

Now, if I or any other preacher were to suggest to you that we had the authority of God, that the message we had for you was direct from God, it wasn’t taught to us by anyone else, nor had we just made a few changes to something we had learnt from someone else then I would expect you to be extremely suspicious. And rightly so. It is for you to test the words I or anyone else speak. But that is not to say that you will not hear the gospel of God from myself or from any other preacher. Far from it. The very reasons Paul gives for his being the authentic gospel from God are the same ones you would be right to be sceptical about today. But his situation is very different from ours. He is writing perhaps 20, 25 years after the death of Jesus. There were still many people living who had been with the living, breathing Jesus, who had seen him die on the cross, who had seen him raised from the dead. Paul himself had met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. We are here 2,000 years later and the message of the gospel is just the same today as it was in Paul’s day. The difference is, with Paul the gospel was first hand. For us, the gospel has been passed from generation to generation.

But we can still say that the gospel we hear is of God just as Paul could say. We have the testimony of generations of Christians. We can apply our reasoning to our faith and test it. We can experience the gospel in our lives and testify to its reality for today. But there are limits to what we can be taught and work out for ourselves. If you could work it out and prove the gospel to be true then there would be no room for any to disbelieve. But we know that that is not the case and that so many people are missing out on so much – their eternal salvation no less and perhaps we can’t understand why. The reason is - the gospel is still of God now and when it comes down to it, it is only he who can convince us that the gospel is true. That is why I believe that the gospel is not just about a set of beliefs or creeds, but is also about God being at work in our lives in ways we may not always recognise.

1. **We have a gospel of grace**

Then Paul tells us that the gospel is one of grace, that is to say, of God’s amazing love for us that is completely free and which we cannot earn for ourselves. V16 ‘*God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me.*’ Paul was the most unlikely person for God to have chosen to bring the gospel particularly to the Gentiles. You will have seen those before and after pictures they have in adverts. It is what Paul was in his previous life and what he had become that for him showed the Grace of God. He had been the most feared persecutor of Christians in his previous life. In fact, in Galatians 1 Paul reminds the church there how zealous he had been in his efforts to destroy the church, v13 *‘For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.*’ And in Acts 8:1 we are told how Paul had approved of the murder of Stephen. It is because of what Paul was when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus that he could now say in v15 ***‘****But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles’*

But that meeting did more than just show Paul the immensity of God’s grace. It caused him to rethink what was important to him. ‘*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.’* V14. We know that Paul was a Pharisee and we know too from the gospels how important it was for them that God’s laws should be obeyed. This is what Paul thought the followers of Jesus were putting at risk. But his rethink made him realise that what was important was not the system of rules, the religion. The most fundamental thing God wanted was for people to enjoy a new relationship with him. It was not the religion that mattered, but the relationship. With the Father who loved the world so much that he gave his only son. With the Son died on the cross for each of us. From that all else followed.

The pity is, so often we as Christians fall into the trap of thinking that what really matters is doing all the right things. That Christianity is about living upright lives, that principles matter above people. Don’t get me wrong, I am not saying that these don’t matter, but what matters more is that we have a new relationship with God through Jesus.

Take the example of John Wesley. He was born in 1703, the son of an Anglican clergyman. In 1725 he did what was probably inevitable and was ordained as a deacon. In 1729 he and his brother Charles were founder members of the Holy Club in Oxford. So disciplined were they in their devotions, prayer and bible study that people gave them the nickname of ‘methodists’. It was not until 1738 though, 13 years after his ordination and 9 years after forming what could be seen as the start of the Methodist movement that he was invited to a meeting in Aldersgate Street where according to his diary *‘In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.’* His previous experience may well have had a bearing on his thinking, but here for the first time he realised that all of what had been important to him before had to be rethought. It was not the religion that was so important but rather the relationship.

Do you know that relationship with Jesus? Is being a Christian for you a matter of sticking to the rules or rather knowing Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? A knowledge that is strangely heart-warming?

1. **The gospel changes lives**

Now we are beginning to see already what the consequences of the gospel are. The gospel changes lives as people get to understand that it is about a relationship with a living God and experience God working in their lives. Perhaps not as dramatic as the change in Paul v23 ‘*The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy*.’ The gospel changes lives.

I have never really understand the idea of being a fan. How they can describe their experience of watching the team play as though they were part of the team is beyond me. They weren’t playing themselves, they weren’t really part of it. If they really wanted to experience it they would have to have been playing themselves.

The thing is, often as Christians we are no more than fans. We see who Jesus and want to get close enough to him to realise the benefits, but not so close that we need to make sacrifices. We may be fine with repeating a prayer, attending church, putting a fish symbol on the back of our car. But we don’t really want anything to change. But Jesus doesn’t want fans. He wants followers. He has the power to change lives, not for the sake of it but out of his amazing love for us. He changed Paul’s life. He changed John Wesley’s life. He can change your life as well. And note the emphasis. It’s God who does the changing, not us. There is nothing we can do to make our lives really better. However hard we may try to obey the rules we are bound to fail. It is by God’s grace in Jesus that we are changed. There was a song in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical ‘ Love changes everything’. But here is an even more crucial saying. ‘Grace changes everything’. No wonder Paul; was so passionate about the gospel. So should we be too.

Today we have heard about the gospel Paul preached: That it came from God, not from man, and so you can be sure of it. That it is the gospel of God’s great and abundant grace in Christ, forgiving all your sins, giving you perfect righteousness and eternal life in Christ your Saviour. And that it is this same gospel that will change your life, continually calling you from the old life of sin and selfishness to the new life of love and service that are the hallmarks of our life in Christ. This is the gospel Paul preached. It’s the gospel he calls the Galatians back to. And it’s the gospel that gives us life, and new life, today.

Finally, how many of you liked equations at school? Well, here’s one for you. It sums up what Paul is saying to the Galatians and through them to us:

JESUS plus NOTHING = EVERYTHING