

In a paper last week there was the headline, I think, therefore I shoot. The article was about two young men in Russia who, while queuing for drinks in a bar got into a passionate argument about the 18th Century philosopher Immanuel Kant. A fist fight developed and then one took out an airgun and shot the other.

I'm not sure why the allusion in the headline to a quote from Descartes but the idea is that thought leads to action and it is that along with a passionate dispute that takes us into today's passage from Galatians.

Again to help those who perhaps are new or who were not here last week what Paul has been doing in writing this letter to these Christians in Galatia in what is now southern Turkey is to try and protect their Christian lives by reaffirming them in their hope for salvation through the gospel and the gospel alone. He did that against the pressure coming from those Paul described as the false brothers that is Christians who had come from Jerusalem and were teaching that while it is fine to begin with salvation through the death of Jesus if these Galatian Christians, who mainly came from a non-Jewish or Gentile background, were to continue in their Christian faith and know final salvation then they must obey the Jewish law and especially they must be circumcised. As I have said in previous weeks these teachers believed in the gospel but they added to it Jewish law and in so doing were negating the gospel.

This led Paul to inform his readers how he had gone to Jerusalem and established the truth of the gospel and now the scene switches to Antioch and Paul tells the readers how he opposed the Apostle Peter.

1. A face off in Antioch v11-14

What we see in these opening verses is not a fist and gun fight in Russia but a confrontation in Antioch. In public Paul opposed Peter and here speaks of him as a hypocrite v13 and of not acting in line with the truth. Just look at v14, "When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

What was in question was not Peter's convictions but his actions and probably his courage.

Peter was convinced that Gentiles could be fully Christians and part of the church. We see that in Acts 10:34-35, "Then Peter began to speak: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Peter had not wavered in his conviction. However under pressure from this group who had come up from Jerusalem he had slowly withdrawn from interaction with gentile believers and had stopped eating with them. This was because Jews saw Gentiles as unclean, the very thing God had shown Peter was

not true. As in the courtyard of the High Priest when Jesus was arrested so here Peter seems to have given in under pressure. It was certainly not a case of 'I think and therefore I do!'

The point though is that if we cannot eat together we are not one family. Peter was inconsistent in the way he was living.

What Peter was indulging in was a form of legalism that has been repeated in the Christian church down the ages. You can't be a real Christian unless you....

Often in the past it has been you can't be a Christian if you go to the Cinema, go to the pub, go to dances etc. But also in different churches and denominations there will be add ons for what makes a real Christian. You can't be a real Christian unless you have been baptised as an adult or baptised as a child. You're not a really Christian unless you sing shine Jesus shine or unless you chant the Te Deum. In so stressing these things we firstly put obstacles in the path of Christian believers but we also can be guilty of looking down on those who do things differently, how else can the terms happy clappy or smells and bells be viewed if not as a put down of those Christians who worship in a different way from us? It is a similar legalism to that which Peter was by his action endorsing.

Talking with Karl Stone a few weeks ago about the course he and Deb to prepare them for the role in church leadership they have taken on he said one of the things they impressed upon them was a respect for all Christians no matter what tradition they came from.

We must not exclude others from the Christian family because they are different from us be it socially, racially or in terms of worship style. If God accepts that person as his child then who am I to suggest by my actions that they are not part of the family of God?

Friends we should with our lives be enhancing the gospel not denying it. I think therefore I do! We should be seeking as Christians to be accepting of all who are Christians. We should be seeking to encourage each other in the Christian life not undermining each other. However, in all this we must be willing as Paul was here, to stand when we see things being done and said which put at risk the gospel and people's salvation.

I remember being in a group of clergy and we were talking about the Bible and the gospel. One Vicar said something like, "I don't know why you are so hung up on the gospel because ultimately everyone will be saved." Now many of us there did not believe that but only one stood up and countered the argument with the truth of the Bible showing that only those who accept Jesus' death will be saved.

To do that requires courage as Paul showed here but when people's lives are at stake through wrong teaching or through sin we need to be willing to speak.

Paul rebuked Peter because his actions were not consistent with his convictions and he did so because he knew what Peter firmly believed, which brings us to

2. the common basis of faith v15-16

The deciding factor as to whether a person is a Christian and the basis upon which we all live our Christian lives is set out by Paul in vs15-16.

Now I not exactly sure who Paul was addressing here whether he is still talking to Peter or to the Christians in Galatia or even the church in Jerusalem. However he points to that which was common to Paul and to all of these and that is the means of their salvation and the basis of their on going Christian lives. What Paul said was we as in Peter, himself, the Christians at Galatia and in Jerusalem, “know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16).

The word justified there is a word from the law court. It is the declaration of being without guilt. We are declared by God to be guiltless, yes we who know so well our sin and failings. On what basis does God justify us? Well as Paul points out here not on the basis of what we have done, not because we have obeyed the law because we haven't at least not all of it. No God the Father declares us justified on the basis of our faith in what he has done in his Son Jesus Christ. He died and in so doing took the punishment we deserve for our sin. I sinned and God's righteous verdict on me is death but Jesus died in my place taking my penalty. Now because the penalty of my sin has been paid God can justly declare me no longer under condemnation but instead pardoned and innocent. By faith I accept what Jesus did and through that and that alone I am justified.

This week in the press the Archbishop of Canterbury has been speaking about Christian martyrs. Of course it is not just the 21st century that has seen this but every century. In his book Risen Indeed Michael Bourdeaux described many Christians who suffered for their faith behind the iron curtain. One, Vasili Koslov, had become a Christian while in prison on criminal charges. Not long after coming out of jail he was arrested for Christian activities. He described the trial. “I remember my first trial as a Christian in 1961. The public prosecutor wanted to reproach me with a reference to my past. He lifted a big volume of my former convictions high over his head and shaking it he shouted, “Look at his past! He was a thief, a gangster, a criminal! And now he has turned into a holy apostle!” In my defence speech I replied, “yes I was a thief and a criminal for which I served my sentence deservedly. But now I am dead to sin and to my past. The power of the blood of Christ has cleansed my wicked heart. Now I am a new man. The book the prosecutor is waving is no more than my former sinful self. But Koslov the criminal and gangster died a long time ago and was buried while today, by the grace of God, Koslov the Christian lives”.”

Friends I hope the same is true for all of us here this morning and for those of you who listen to this by download. I hope you can say by the grace of God I am a Christian and that, as Paul says, you know we are justified by faith in what God has done and not by our own efforts. If you have not understood this yet then please speak to a Christian friend or to me and let's think and pray this

through because God wants you to know his love and he wants you to live your life in the light of his love, sure that his love for you doesn't waver or change despite your failings. I say this because we know very well that even if we have been following Jesus for many years we still do things wrong. We still sin.

3. Living for God v17-21

Paul knew that and he knew that to say we don't live by the law would create a reaction. He knew that people would say that if you dismiss the law like this then people will just act as they please doing all kinds of wrong things and so in a sense you make it seem as if Jesus is promoting sin. Paul's response to that is Rubbish, or here "Absolutely not".

His point as we see in v18 is that all the law can do is show that we are lawbreakers. All it can do is condemn. By accepting Jesus death and being joined to him we have died to the law that is the law's demand of death because of our sin has been met. This is what we have in the great v20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." When by faith I accepted what Jesus did for me on the cross I died to self and to the law in that the law's demand was met because I died for my sin yet not I but Jesus Christ on my behalf. Now through that death I have a new life, a life in Christ.

I recognise that this is complicated but what Paul is saying is that in trying to live by obeying the law I am living for myself, trying to make myself good enough for God. Whereas living by faith I am living for God, to please and honour him in all I do and I do that through obeying the law.

Before, Paul is saying, the law was external but now he is dead to that and alive to God whose law is in his heart. This is what Jeremiah said would happen, ""This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (Jer 31:33)

Yes there is obedience to the law but it comes from an inner desire to please and honour God and not as a means of being acceptable to God.

In all this Paul says in v21 it is he who is living God's way. He is living by faith because to do anything else is in effect to say that Christ died for nothing and that is a very sobering thought.

So how are we living? Are we showing in our lives that God is real to us? Is there in us that desire to serve and honour God which is to obey his law? Yes of course we will get it wrong and we will sin and over again we will need to come and seek forgiveness. But in Christ there is forgiveness and in Christ our eternal future in heaven is secure but only through his death on the cross.

Peter was encouraged by Paul to live what he believed and we are encouraged to do the same and, as Paul did, to be willing to stand up for what we believe, the truth of the gospel. May God gives us strength and courage to do that.