

Gal 4:8-31 CC 10.30am 27th Oct 2013

While on holiday in Northumberland recently I went out for a walk. I was following the St Cuthbert's way but looking for St Cuthbert's cave. The short version was I got a bit lost and eventually stood at a footpath sign which made no sense at all. The reason why it made no sense was because at the previous crossroads I had taken the wrong path. The only option left was to go back to that intersection of paths and take the right path.

We have just had a passage read from the Bible. It was part of a letter written centuries ago by the apostle Paul to some Christians living in Galatia which we now call southern Turkey.

We have been looking at this letter over the last weeks and, while it was written ages ago and as it was read you may have wondered what it was all about, I think it has something to say to us today.

Paul was writing to the people who had recently begun as it were on the path of following Jesus.

They'd become Christians. They had come from a pagan background where they had worshipped all kinds of idols but now they had turned their lives around and were following Jesus. However having begun on this path they had got a bit lost. Some teachers had come along telling them of a better way which was actually like a dead end. Paul's letter was written to help them see they'd taken the wrong path and to encourage them back onto the right path of following Jesus.

1. The starting point

These people Paul was writing to were people he had worked with and he speaks in this passage of "preaching the gospel" to them and his "efforts" for them. He had seen these people, come to faith, become followers of Jesus however we want to put it. He'd been like a spiritual father or even mother to them, for at the end of the passage he said "My dear children for whom I am again in pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you". He saw himself as their spiritual mentor concerned for their continued growth as Christians very much in the way that any parent is concerned for the ongoing growth and well being of their children. Paul had come to them in Iconium or wherever and he had explained the good news of what God had done in Jesus and they had believed. So he could write in v9 "Now that you know God or rather are known by God."

They knew God. How because Paul had explained to them who Jesus is and what Jesus had done for them. But more God knew them. What did he mean by that, because if God is God surely he must know everything?

It is about relationship. A man sees a woman across a room and asks "who is that?" A friend might say something about her, "It's Sue from accounts". So he knows her but of course he doesn't. 10 years later when he has wined, dined, married her and had two children well perhaps he knows her and certainly he is known by her. What Paul is saying here is that having believed the good news of God's love in Jesus they had begun to know God but more God knew them as his children and seeing

them as his children he knew them differently from those who have yet to accept God's love and become his children.

As I look round the room I see many people for whom this has been true. Men and women who have either grown up into a faith in Jesus or like me have suddenly at one point heard the gospel and believed but all who have like these people Paul was writing to have begun on the path of following Jesus. That was the starting point.

2. The wrong path

The issue as Paul saw it was that now they had gone off the path of following Jesus, in v9 he uses the expression "but now you are turning back" and Paul's message through the letter was don't follow that path it is a dead end.

There are two things here he warns them about.

Firstly he says they were turning back to "weak and miserable principles". In a sense what Paul was saying here is that the basic principle by which most people live is that we are in control of our own lives. We are God in our own lives and as such we can choose what we invest worth or value in, that is we choose what we worship. An comment was about a man once which said, "He is a self made man and he worships his creator". These people had seen that there was a great God who had revealed himself in Jesus through whom we can be restored as children of God, but were now going backwards and trying somehow to make themselves acceptable to God by their own efforts. I am in control of my life and my eternal destiny. However, as Paul has said over and again in this letter, if we could make ourselves acceptable to God by our own efforts why would God have sent his son to die for us?

They had been on the right path of trusting Jesus now they were going back to trusting in the things they did.

I haven't done an exam for ages which is quite good as there were quite a lot I failed. But what God makes clear in the Bible is that he is holy and perfect and requires the same of his people. In a sense it is as if he sets the exam mark at 50%, we might be pretty good and get say forty or really bad and only get 5% but none of us can pass. None of us is holy, all of us have done things wrong and there is nothing we can do to put ourselves right with God.

However the good news, which Paul had shared with these people is that Jesus on the cross took the punishment that we deserve for our wrong doing so that through him we might be restored as children of God. Without Jesus we are as it were chained to our sin and the results of our sin unable to break free but Jesus' death achieves our pardon and makes us acceptable children of God.

Paul's point here is that having accepted that and begun on that path why were they turning back and trying a different way?

His words are a message to all who think I don't need God I can manage my life pretty well on my own to ask us to stop and think and ask am I on the right path? I would humbly suggest not and am happy to help anyone who wishes to explore more of what this means.

Secondly they were v10 "observing special days and months and seasons and years". Now he wasn't saying don't celebrate special days like today or my birthday or Christmas. The point he was making here was that they had gone all religious and were observing all kinds of holy days. Rules and regulations had taken them over and the form of religion had become their god rather than God. Again they were trying by their own efforts to make God pleased with them but all Paul saw them doing was putting a pointless burden on themselves almost wrapping themselves in chains of religious practice. There is a quote which says, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile". Now please don't get me wrong there is nothing wrong with going to church nothing wrong with observing holy days like Easter and so on but if I think that doing this is going to make God like me more I am on the wrong path. It is not the right way forward.

3. The thing to do

Standing in front of this signpost which made no sense two women told us the truth and while I wasn't best pleased, which is a slight understatement, I did what they said and retraced my steps. So we turned back and eventually came to the crossroads and then could see where we had gone wrong.

That was what Paul wanted these Christians to do. He wanted them to turn back and take the right path once more. He wanted them to continue to live by faith in God and not by their own efforts. What I would wish to say to us today is the same. There may be some here this morning or listening to this on download who have never started on the path of following Jesus. I am asking you to turn back from the path which takes you away from God, to come back to the crossroads and see the way marked Jesus and walk that way.

For others of us we may have been walking this way for many years but recognise that actually we have drifted off the path perhaps without realising it and now rather than trusting Jesus for our life and our eternal future we have begun to trust our own efforts. Please if you recognise that is where you are at let me encourage you to turn round and come back to the crossroads and also look for that way marked Jesus and walk that way trusting him and him only for life and for our salvation. Hundreds of years before Jesus God spoke to his people through the prophet Jeremiah and said, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." (Jer 6;16). Paul would say that is great advice and I would echo that.