

Gal 4:8-31 CC 9am 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 problem was at the previous crossroads I had taken the wrong path and the only answer left was to go back to that intersection of paths and take the right path.

In Jeremiah 6 we see the prophet speaking to the people of God and he said to them "This is what the Lord says: "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

In a sense as Paul wrote this letter the Christians in Galatia they had as it were taken a wrong path and were at risk of becoming lost spiritually. They had at one point been spiritually lost but had been found and saved by the gospel message Paul had brought to them. However, in the journey as disciples they had taken a wrong turn and gone off the track and Paul was writing with some concern to help them back on track.

His fear is however that they would do what Israel did in the time of Jeremiah, "This is what the Lord says: "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. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'"

Here he spells out three results of them taking the wrong path

1. It is a backward step v8-11

If we look at v8-9 we see that these people had in the past been "slaves to those who by nature are not gods". That is they had been pagans and following their own idols or not even bothering with God at all. Then v9 "But now you know God – or rather are known by God" that is they had become children of God, those God knows as his own. They had become children of Abraham as we have been seeing over the last weeks. That had happened in the same way that it had for Abraham, by trusting God's promise.

The sadness for Paul who saw these people as a sort of spiritual children was that now v9 "you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles". They had taken the wrong path, which was centred on a basic principle that we need to save ourselves something the gospel shows we cannot do.

What they were doing specifically was taking on board Jewish festivals and celebrations v10 as if these some how would help them grow as children of God.

Paul saw it as a backwards step. He could not understand how they could, having enjoyed a relationship with God and enjoyed his love through the cross, step back into a religion of seeking to earn his love by their own efforts.

People often say to me “but I am not religious” and I agree that I am not religious either because religion is all about rules whereas Christianity is all about relationship.

These Christians were becoming what we might describe as religious people rather than people who live by faith in God.

John Stott wrote about these people:

‘They are like John Wesley in his post-graduate Oxford days in the Holy Club. He was the son of a clergyman and already a clergyman himself. He was orthodox in belief, religious in practice, upright in conduct and full of good works. He and his friends visited the inmates of the prisons and work-houses of Oxford. They took pity on the slum children of the city, providing them with food, clothing and education. They observed Saturday as the Sabbath as well as Sunday. They went to church and to Holy Communion. They gave alms, searched the Scriptures, fasted and prayed. But they were bound in the fetters of their own religion, for they were trusting in themselves that they were righteous, instead of putting their trust in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. A few years later, John Wesley (in his own words) came to ‘trust in Christ, in Christ only for salvation’ and was given an inward assurance that his sins had been taken away. After this, looking back to his pre-conversion experience, he wrote: ‘I had then the faith of a *servant*, not that of a son.’’

What Wesley was involved in might be described as churchianity. It was a going through the motions of religious activity without the core of real faith in Jesus. It must not be the way for us we begin by faith and continue by faith.

These Christians had been on the right path but had turned back and taken the wrong one, no wonder Paul was puzzled and fears he has wasted his efforts.

2. It had affected their view of the gospel and the gospel messenger v12-20

The Andrew Mitchell ‘plebgate’ affair has been damaging for the reputation of the police. Every situation like this has the effect of eroding public trust in the police which is of course a shame because we recognise that while no organisation is perfect our police are very good and do an excellent job. However such bad press can erode public trust and confidence. This is a bit of what had happened amongst these churches and Christians in Galatia.

It is clear that they at one time held Paul in high regard as we see in v15. It is possible that the illness he suffered while with them affected his sight but such was their love for him that, had it been possible, they would have given him their eyes. However, now it is a different story. He was receiving bad press from these false teachers who were claiming he was not really an apostle and that his gospel was not true.

So it would seem they had lost their love for Paul and he says v15 they have lost their joy.

That what happens, take the wrong road and there is little joy is there? I certainly had no joy at that point in my walk when I realised I was lost.

The change clearly had come with these teachers whose teaching has not just turned them from the gospel but from the gospel messenger.

They had in a sense become followers of these teachers, which it would appear was part of the aim of the teachers. We can see that in v17 where Paul says they tried to win them over and make these Galatian Christians be zealous for them! In contrast Paul's desire has always been for them to be 'formed in Christ' v19 and to that he had laboured hard.

But rather than them see him as their friend or their father in God v16 is a sad situation, "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?"

I think this is something that worries many of us when we start talking to friends about the gospel. We worry that they are not going to like what they hear and as a result they will turn away from us and no longer be our friends. But what else can we do? What Paul is about here and what we are about as we share the gospel is vital and important. We may shy away from the truth if someone asks us "does my bottom look big in this" but when it is a matter of eternal salvation are we to fudge the truth?

There was a programme on the radio recently and as ever I only heard part of it but it was about how Doctors speak to patients. One lady said that she was obese and her Doctor said to her, "if you don't do something about this soon you will be dead before you are 40." Her comment was that this was the clear statement that she needed to prod her into action and that anything less would have left her continuing on the same path.

This is why as I said in the first of the series Paul uses such strong language. He calls them fools, he asks who has bewitched them and even if we go on to 5:12 to wish that the false teachers would go and emasculate themselves! This is serious. Now I'm not suggesting that we all go round shouting you're all going to hell, but I am suggesting that if we are fearful that sharing our faith will risk a friendship the course we should go down is to take that risk.

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. I have also to say that of course it is not just our friends outside the church who may bridle at the gospel there are also many inside who see the gospel as an affront and hold in low esteem and even ridicule those of us who place a high importance on the gospel and sharing that gospel. People who see the gospel as important are known as evangelicals and we are often bashed by the church hierarchy but even though I have put up with it over more than 30 years I know that it is worth it to have a ministry based on the gospel and on calling people to accept by faith what God has done for

them and live by that faith. I hope we see the value in that and I pray that this congregation will always see this as a vital part of our ministry as a church.

3. It removes the inheritance from them v21-31

The false brothers had been telling them that they would be if they observed the law the true children of Abraham and so to inherit the promise of the people of God. However, Paul says the opposite is true, v28 where he spoke to reassure them that they were true children of God.

Once again he takes them back to Abraham as he has done through Chapter three.

This time he speaks in what might seem to us an odd way to show them that by faith they really are the true sons of Abraham, heirs of the promise and children of God.

Abraham received the promise of God but who inherits that promise? Paul's response has been throughout the letter those who live by faith are the inheritors of the promise not those who live by the law.

Here he demonstrates that.

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael was born to Hagar who was a slave and so born into slavery. Paul says this represents those who seek to gain God's favour by obeying the law and has v25 its centre or focus in the earthly city of Jerusalem.

Isaac was born to Sarah a free woman and born according to the promise of God. He was born into freedom and is a citizen of the heavenly city of Jerusalem.

The only way to enjoy the inheritance of eternity is to continue by faith. To follow the path of law simply binds us to our earthly humanity and enslaves us. Whereas to live by faith sets us free.

Paul's plea through the letter to these young Christians is to turn back onto the right path of living by faith and trusting in the promises of God. This was Abraham's way.

Through this Paul sought to reassure these Christians that to continue to life by faith was the way they remained heirs to the promise.

Yes it may v29 result in persecution because people, especially inside the church will attack those who hold to the gospel but it is the only way in which they will grow as Christians, continue to experience the grace of God and receive the inheritance of eternal life.

It is v31 those who hold to the gospel promise who are free and having begun in freedom they and we should continue in freedom.

These Christians had begun to go along the wrong path and Paul's encouragement here and throughout the letter is come back onto the path of faith for that is God's way as it always has been and the only way to enjoy peace with God and the certainty of eternal life.

Friends this is what God would say to us this morning through his word. For those who have begun the path of following Jesus it is to make sure that we continue to walk the way of faith.

Let's not get dragged off that path into a kind of churchianity whereby we put store on our attendance at church or our service or our giving to the church. Good as they are they must stem out of a relationship with our heavenly father. Let's not get lured onto a path of legalism of simply observing the law as if through it God will bless us. Our obedience must stem out of our love for our Heavenly Father and our desire to honour and please him in our lives.

So as you think about your Christian life, your journey of faith let me ask which path are you walking on? Are you walking by faith or are you seeking to walk by observing the law?

I think this morning Paul would say to all of us those words of Jeremiah, "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. We walk by faith.