

Sunday 2 June – Second Sunday after Pentecost
Galatians 1:1-11; Luke 7:1-10

Introduction:

Reading a letter is rather like doing a Wasgij – one of those back-to-front jigsaw puzzles. The picture on the front of the box doesn't show you what the finished jigsaw will look like – instead it shows the response of those who are looking at the scene depicted by the jigsaw. So to complete the Wasgij you need to work back from the clues on the box to what the picture will be.

Reading Galatians is rather like that. We read Paul's letter, and it is passionate and urgent – clearly something has happened among the Galatians that has made him very upset. But what? In the opening verses we will read today, Paul thunders against “a different gospel”. Anyone who proclaims another gospel is to be cursed – anathema! This 'different gospel isn't gospel at all – it's confusing , a perversion. But what is this non-gospel that has Paul so riled up? We can only work that out by working backward from Paul's response to the situation – piecing together the Wasgij.

Sermon

What is the gospel?

It's clear that this is at the heart of what Paul is so passionately upset about. There is the gospel that he has proclaimed (in fact in the the Greek he says “the gospel which I gospelled”) and then there is a different gospel which is not a gospel at all.

You know, I'm sure, that 'gospel' means 'good news'. That's how what we now know as Mark's gospel begins “The good news of Jesus Christ”¹ But the word has history, connections, nuances in the way it was originally used. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, within the context of the Roman empire, *euangelia*, the plural of the noun, was often used in the propaganda of the imperial cult to describe proclamations of the emperor's military victories. An inscription from Asia Minor in 9BC extols the emperor Augustus as a god and proclaims that his birthday “was for the world the beginning of the glad tidings (*euangelia*) which have gone forth because of him.”

When the early Christians said that the story of Jesus was *euanglion*, the good news, there was an implicit challenge to the imperial cult, a declaration that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord.

At the same time *euangelion* calls to mind the texts from Isaiah where the word is used to describe the deliverance that the LORD will bring to God's people who are in exile in Babylon as he leads them back to their land - “How lovely on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, announcing peace, proclaiming salvation”²

So the gospel is good news of salvation, of victory, but not the sort of good news that might be proclaimed by the imperial cult. This is not the gospel of the victory of conquest and military occupation, but rather the gospel of grace – of God's gift in Jesus Christ. God is the one who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, Jesus who gave himself for our sins, to free us from this present evil age – and in all this to fulfill the will of our God and Father.

Paul believes that this God has a purpose for the created world. He believes that “the present evil age” will give way, in God's good time, to “the age to come,” in which Israel and the world will be redeemed from the power of the false gods. And the gospel he has declared is that God has broken into the world, in the person of Jesus and the power of the Spirit of Jesus, to usher in the long-awaited new age and so to redeem Israel and the world. In Jesus the Messiah Israel's God has dealt with sin and established the new world, the “age to come,” and God has called the Gentiles to belong to God's renewed people.³

Paul is insistent that the gospel he has proclaimed, the gospel the Galatians had heard and believed, did not

1 Mark 1:1

2 Isaiah 52:7

3 N.T.Wright: *The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology* (Originally published in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., 2000, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 205–36. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

come from any human source, nor was it backed by human authority – the gospel of grace comes from God, through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

If we do a Wasgij on that point, we can see that Paul is rejecting any suggestion that he is reliant on any human authorisation. Listen to the way he introduces himself:

“Paul an apostle”

(but weren't the apostles those who had lived with Jesus and witnessed the resurrection? And wasn't Paul a former persecutor of these very same apostles?)

“whose call did not come from human beings or by human means but from Jesus Christ and God the Father”.

Paul's insistence that his call is from God alone suggests that he is being challenged on this very point. And from what we read further in the letter to the Galatians, we can deduce that Paul's opponents, those who have been advancing 'a different gospel', have claimed that they preach under the authority of the church in Jerusalem, the 'mother church', and of the 'real' apostles who are part of that church, notably Peter and James – and that Paul does not. Paul has got it wrong. Paul has no authority.

Paul wants to insist that what he does is not based on any human authority, but on the initiative and action of God. It is God who raised Jesus from the dead. It is God's will that we be set free, through Jesus' giving himself for our sins. It is God who called the Galatians. Paul is acting and preaching as one under authority, but that authority comes directly from God.

(And do you hear an echo of the amazing insight of the Roman centurion, who recognised in Jesus one who was under authority. It was because Jesus acted under God's authority that the centurion trusted, believed, had faith that Jesus could heal his servant. And because the centurion recognised that it was God at work through Jesus, he didn't need to see Jesus, he didn't need Jesus to be there - “Just say the word, and let my servant be healed”. As God had said the word in the beginning and brought all things into being, so Jesus need only say the word now, and life would be restored, would begin again. “Wow,” said Jesus, “I haven't found faith like this even in Israel”)

Paul insists that THE gospel is the good news of God's rescue mission begun, continued and completed in Jesus. Nothing more is needed – nothing more can be added – in Jesus' death and resurrection all is accomplished.

Reading further in Galatians, it becomes obvious that Paul's opponents, these people who have confused the Galatians with a perversion of the gospel, are insisting that in order to be authentic followers of Jesus, Gentile converts must first embrace the Jewish covenants and practices, beginning with circumcision. Paul says he is astonished – but for many in the earliest Christian community, it was virtually unthinkable to cut out Jewish practices from Christian community. This would mean a sacrifice of the customs that had held the Jewish people together over many centuries and through terrible persecutions. It would mean betraying their heritage, martyrs and a whole universe of values, practices and authorities. For many of the original followers of Jesus, being “Christian” meant a particular way of being Jewish.

Paul didn't deny God's past history with Israel, which is his heritage too. But he claimed to be speaking as a true Jew, declaring that Israel's God had now acted climactically and decisively in Jesus, the Messiah, to fulfill God's purposes for Israel and for the whole world. He was now announcing to all the world that the one true God was addressing, claiming, and redeeming it by the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world.

What Paul had learnt through a revelation of Jesus Christ was that in Jesus God had done all that was necessary to bring the whole world into right relationship with God and with one another. And so all that was necessary to enter into that right relationship with God, to become part of the people of God, was faith in Jesus, trust in Jesus. There was no longer a requirement to be circumcised and to enter into the Jewish covenant – when Jesus gave himself for our sins he established a new covenant, a new relationship with God, and called us to be part of it. The old covenant had been fulfilled in Jesus, and he became in his own

body and blood, in his self-giving on the cross, the new covenant with God. And God vindicated all that Jesus had done by raising him from the dead. That is the good news that Paul had proclaimed – the good news that the Galatians had received and believed.

The Roman centurion had shown the way. He was someone who was willing to trust Jesus, to have faith in Jesus, and that was all that was needed. Jesus recognised his faith, and responded with healing. Jesus did not expect the centurion to become a Jew. He did not require anything else of him. Rather, Jesus commended the faith of one who, however sympathetic, was outside the covenant of Israel. Although Jesus' ministry was primarily to the 'lost sheep of Israel', it was clear in this encounter that being welcomed into God's fold, God's flock was open to all who would have faith in Jesus, who would trust him as the one in whom God's power and authority were at work in the world, rescuing people from 'the present evil age' and beginning the establishment of the kingdom, the reign of God.

Is this our understanding of the gospel? Is this the way we live our lives as Christians, and the way we teach and demonstrate for others? That all who trust Jesus, who have faith in Jesus, are part of God's covenant people, and there is nothing more they need to do or be, no requirements that are laid on them, no standards or patterns of behaviour that are necessary.

God loves them, and there is nothing they can do to make God love them more.

God loves them and there is nothing they can do to make God love them less.

God loves them – just as God loves each one of us.

To God be glory, forever and ever, Amen