

Sermon for 17th February 2019 (Third Sunday before Lent) - Evensong
Hosea 10. 1 - 8, 12; Ps. 6; Gal. 4. 8 - 20

The letter to the Galatians is thought to have been the first letter that Paul wrote, as indeed was Galatia one of the first provinces of the Roman Empire that Paul visited when he set out on his first missionary journey, probably in 46 AD. And the main purpose behind his writing this letter was to deal with one of the biggest problems that troubled the early Church: namely that the hard-core orthodox Jews who had accepted faith in Christ as the Messiah nevertheless looked on this faith as a branch of Judaism and not as a new “religion”. Thus they insisted that Gentiles who embraced the Christian faith should first become Jews, ie should be circumcised and accept the teachings of the Mosaic Law, including accepting the Jewish festivals and other customs. Even Peter, who had first realised that Gentiles could be saved, through his encounter with Cornelius, had been swayed back to the idea that Jewish Christians should separate themselves from Gentile proselytes; Paul reproached him very firmly over this in Antioch and won him back. It was about this time that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians because he had heard that they were being swayed by the orthodox Jewish Christians to approach Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism and to accept the Jewish traditions/festivals etc.

Paul’s letter, after a brief opening greeting, is one long reproof of the Galatians for having deserted him and his teaching of the good news of Jesus Christ and for accepting instead the Judaistic interpretation of the gospel, which was to him a perversion of the gospel that he, Paul, had received direct from God and not through the first apostles. Perhaps those first orthodox-Jewish Christians, who had followed Paul into Galatia in the intervening three or four years, had been afraid of persecution - as indeed Paul too had been persecuted when he tried to preach the gospel in the synagogues - and were therefore trying to please the local Jews by adhering to the basic Jewish Law. However, Paul was at pains to explain in his letter that the gospel he was preaching was that salvation was now available to all men and women through the grace of God, and not through adherence to the Law which no one could keep faithfully. Indeed, Jesus Christ took on himself the curse of the law by dying on the cross for our sins - for those sins for which the Mosaic Law condemns us. To Paul, and to us today, the cross is of central importance to the Christian faith; if it were not so, but rather justification comes through the Law, then Christ died for nothing (as Paul writes at the end of chapter 2).

Then in chapter three Paul reminds the Galatians that, when they came to faith through Paul’s preaching about the cross, they had received the Holy Spirit. And he then quotes the example of Abraham whose belief in God was “reckoned to him as righteousness” - that is, God acknowledged Abraham to be a man full of faith and integrity. So Paul goes on to argue that all people, whether Jewish or Gentile, who come to believe in Christ are the descendants of Abraham. ***“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are***

Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” So, in tonight's passage, Paul again reproves the Galatians for having gone backwards to the enslavement from which belief in the gospel he had brought to them had freed them. They are no longer slaves, but rather children and therefore heirs of God.

Those were indeed difficult days in the first years of the early church, when the gospel was being preached by word of mouth only. The letter Paul wrote to the Galatians was probably the first time that the early Christians had had the opportunity of actually reading some of the reasoning behind the good news that was being spread abroad. Today we have the advantage of having the four gospels that bear the witness of those who lived with Jesus and actually saw his crucifixion and how that led to his resurrection and ascension into heaven. John in his gospel makes clear that there are but two choices for those who come to faith through God's grace. Either we become a disciple of Christ, with all that that entails - not just coming to Jesus but sticking with him however tough the going may become and revealing our faith in him to others through the way we live our daily lives; the alternative is to draw back and no longer walk with Jesus. It is not enough to say on an intellectual level that I believe that Jesus died for my sins and/or he is the Son of God; nor is it enough to think that we can start a relationship with Jesus without any obligations on our part; nor to take the stance that one can believe without understanding something about Jesus's identity, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. No, we need to understand something of his mission and relationship with his Father *and* we need to remain with him in discipleship. Do we live up to this high standard?

Amen.