

St Paul takes on the fundamentalists

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 05 June 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 3C

Galatians 1:11-24 & Luke 7: 11-17

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In the season after Easter I enjoyed the way the lectionary invited us to engage with the second part of Luke's gospel, the book that we know as Acts. A few weeks ago the lectionary took us to Acts 9, the dramatic story of Saul/Paul being knocked to the ground and being blinded in order to recognize the risen Christ, and so to change the direction of his life.

What we didn't talk about at that stage was the way in which Acts quite often has a bit of a go at St Paul in favour of St Peter. Two weeks ago Robin Meyers preached on the wonderful story of Peter's vision at Joppa, a story which sees Peter leading the early church into an embrace of the Gentiles, and into a rejection of the distinction between clean and unclean.

Today's reading from Galatians tells Paul's story of his conversion in his own words. And reminds us that there was real tension, if not actual conflict, between Paul and Peter's community in Jerusalem, between Paul and other missionaries who had worked with the apostles who knew Jesus.

Today's reading also reminds us that it was Paul, not Peter and his people, who pushed for the radical inclusivity of the gospel in those early days. Who spoke of grace so powerful that nothing else was required.

I often struggle with Paul's letters as a source for preaching (as you might have noticed). Unlike the narratives of the gospels and Acts, it is hard to contextualize them and to engage with them as story.

Today, in this letter, Paul speaks of the moment of his call and his understanding of the mission that came from that call. His telling of his conversion experience may seem much more dramatic than most of us have experienced, but it can provide us with an invitation to think about our own sense of call - our own mission, our vocation in our lives. What was the moment when we decided to be followers of the way of Jesus, or if we grew up in the church, what was the moment when we decided to make that choice our own, to choose intentionally to stay?

One of Rachel Collis's beautiful songs on Friday night was about the way we continue to make choices in our lives, to continue to choose and she was talking about relationships. Rachel spoke, before the song, of how she and Steve were ridiculously young (in her words) when they got married. The song is an affirmation of the choice to continue to love. And the refrain was: *I still choose you.*

I was ridiculously young when I sensed a call to ministry. Really it was bordering on stupid to contemplate such a path at nineteen years old. And it was probably even stupider of the church to accept that I had this call. At times I've wondered if maybe God called me when I was so young before so it wouldn't be obvious to the church just how irritating I was going to be. Before my awakening to feminism, and long before my awakening to my own sexual orientation.

I didn't have a road to Damascus experience. It just grew in me until, through my study in my first degree in political science and religious studies, and then in my theological studies, it was really strong and clear.

I was ridiculously young and I could have walked away many times. And there were many times, especially in the face of misogyny and homophobia, it would have been the sensible thing to do...

And yet I chose, again and again, to follow this path. Most recently I chose it again in 2013, when I chose you, when I chose to be here, to live out that call that will not let me go, with you. And of course, that was only possible because you chose me.

When I began my theological training I had no resources to encounter the view of many of my conservative fellow students that women were not called to ministry, that women were, in fact, not fit for ministry.

I remember my delight in reading in Galatians a verse that legitimized my calling and affirmed my intuitive sense of the inclusiveness of the Gospel and of the way of Jesus.

Galatians 3:28, a couple of chapters on from today's reading, began my journey into seeing the presence of women on the Jesus way as a core aspect of the gospel and a central insight into the nature of a God who loves us all, equally.

"There is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28)

I remember a fundamentalist student telling me that this was talking about heaven and did not currently apply to life on earth, and particularly, not to the Presbyterian Church in 1979. But I knew that Paul was writing to actual churches in Galatia, and if it was true in the first two decades of the church's life, it was certainly true in 1978.

So at that time I experienced Paul's writing as a source of liberation.

But there were many other parts of Paul's letters that have been deeply problematic. Even in this text today, we see some rather unattractive aspects of Paul.

Paul's letters are often polemical and one sided. We don't know what the recipients, or the people he was writing about, thought about any of this. But his letters certainly remind us that the early church was not a golden age of theological and ecclesiastical harmony.

Usually the people that Paul is criticising are nameless - heretics. But Galatians is different. In Galatians, Paul describes a bitter fight he's had with none other than Peter. In Galatians chapter 2, Paul writes that Peter is completely wrong - "self-condemned", acting in "hypocrisy" in a way that caused others to be "led astray" -- and on a matter that is, in Paul's view at least, about the very "truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:11-14).

Because of the way that Paul is used by conservative Christians in our time, he is often regarded with suspicion by progressive Christians. He is the one who changed the faith of Jesus in God, into the faith in Jesus as God. Paul has been presented as supporting slavery, the subjugation of women, the condemnation of homosexuality, the demands of governments for unquestioning obedience and even the extermination of Jewish people.

All of these interpretations of Paul have been contested in recent writing by progressive theologians such as Borg and Crossan in their book "The First Paul."

But back to Galatians... where Paul who is so often quoted by fundamentalists in our time, takes on fundamentalism in his time.

Paul is angry about what has happened in Galatia. He doesn't start off in his usual fashion. No stylised greeting, no word of thanksgiving to God for the Galatian community. He begins with confrontation. In the verses leading up to our reading today, he expresses his amazement that they had turned away from the gospel he had presented to them.

It was not that they'd gone back to their pre-conversion beliefs. It was rather that they had been carried away by a new set of preachers who were much more like fundamentalists than Paul. These newcomers upheld the scripture to the letter and so insisted that the Galatians must be circumcised, as Genesis 17 requires.

They saw Paul's mission which had exempted the Gentiles from circumcision as a sell-out of the truth. Paul was making faith easy. No wonder he was successful - all those God-fearing men (who followed Judaism but did not convert) sitting up the back of the synagogue holding out (quite understandably, I might say) against being circumcised could all now come to the centre and be accepted as they were.

It was a coup for Paul's mission, but other missionaries saw it as a betrayal both of scripture and of Israel. To Paul their literalistic and legalistic approach was an anathema.

So, in the passage we heard, Paul feels he has to justify himself. It seems that his opponents were claiming that they had better credentials than Paul had. They could "name-drop" leading apostles with whom they had been associated. Paul had no such authority.

His retelling of his conversion and call can sound grandiose and bragging to our ears. But there was much more at stake than Paul's ego. It was a matter of what lay at the heart of faith. Was it grace with freedom to remove barriers, including biblical ones if need be? Or was it law enshrined in an attitude towards the biblical texts, which is so familiar to us from today's fundamentalisms?

These problems confronted Paul over and over again throughout his ministry. His willingness not to give up, but to assert at great cost what he believed to be true, has left us with this rich and complex legacy of his letters.

Today's epistle reading presents the first stage in his argument. The basis for his understanding of faith doesn't come from direct instruction from senior apostles. It is not human derived. It is divinely inspired. Christ met Paul at his conversion on the Damascus road and turned him around from being a violent, religious fanatic.

After his conversion Paul summarized the entire Bible of his day in five words: "*Love your neighbours as yourselves*" (Galatians 5:14). Don't ever weary of taking every opportunity to "*do good to all people,*" he told the Galatians (6:9-10). This is a Paul that I can love!

So Paul's story is a paradigm of how authentic religious conversion, which has a beginning point but no end, validates itself by the repudiation of hatred in all its forms and the demonstration of indiscriminate love towards all people.

Paul's following of the Way of Jesus surely did have a pretty dramatic beginning but again and again, through all the tough times, Paul chose to stay. Paul said to the God made known to him in Christ, I still choose you.

Paul didn't emerge from these experiences as a perfect person, but he did emerge as a changed person.

So - what about us? When have our minds and hearts been changed—through experiences, listening to people who are very different from us? People of another race or religion, a different social class or generation or national origin, refugees or immigrants, people of minority sexual orientation or gender identity, people with mental illness or physical or intellectual disability?

When we think and talk about other people and groups, we can, even with the best intentions, objectify and stereotype them. We may think (or even be certain) that we know what is best for them. When we meet people, build relationships, stop talking long enough to hear and absorb their stories, we will be changed.

With changed hearts and minds, we, like Paul, are ready to re-enter the world with deeper understanding, wiser spirits, and renewed vision.

It's true that some of Paul's writings continue to function as texts of terror in the hands of modern-day fundamentalists. As we work to enlighten and heal the texts within and beyond Paul's own writing, we progressives are sometimes accused of superseding biblical authority. Charges of adapting the text to our own needs, whims, and biases are as old as the biblical texts themselves and charges that would have been familiar to Paul.

But having this conversation with the text, the conversation that brings love and liberty to bear on texts that limit compassion and freedom, is what we are called to do as interpreters of the word for our time and our place, allowing the free and freeing good news of Christ to be heard.

We know that Jesus drew an inextricable connection between claiming to love God and demonstrating that we love our fellow human beings. It is to this love, that we, lay and ordained, are all called. It is this love which is the interpretive key that opens the truth of the sacred texts – including the writings of Paul.

This passage reminds us that the ever-present, ever-moving Spirit is still speaking. It reminds us that this Spirit has a moment by moment as well as long-term vision for our lives, and that each one of us has a vocation in every encounter, and in the course of our lifetime. Frederick Beuchner wrote, "*Our vocation is the place where our gifts meet the world's needs.*"

To say this is an affirmation of God's lively and intentional presence in every moment of our lives. When we discover our deepest gifts and callings, we, like Paul, are transformed. New energies are released, and life becomes miraculous indeed as we live in accordance with divine abundance, generosity, and wholeness.

Thanks be to God.