**15th July 2007**

**Galatians 6 verses 1-18**

On Tuesday morning I had a bit of a jolly when I joined 600 people, including MPs, peers and Christian leaders, for the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. It met in Westminster Hall. I was sat next to David Drew our MP and the High Commissioner for Kenya. Also on my table were the Tory MPs Nigel Evans, Sarah Newton and the Government Prisons Minster Robert Buckland and also the Moderator of the URC General Assembly Derek Eskill. So I was hob knobbing with the movers and shakers. Back of my mind was Debbie’s instructions to me not to talk with my mouth full – so I didn’t actually have that much breakfast. As we celebrate our 25th Wedding Anniversary I acknowledge her wonderful partnership and ability to keep me grounded and not get too high an opinion of myself.

The key note speaker was Bishop of London Sarah Mullally who spoke about valuing those who hold opposite opinions.

As we tucked into our danish pastries and mushroom and chive frittatas, she spoke about the need to look past binary politics and see those who disagree with us as someone made in the image of God.

She said "We risk submitting one binary narrative for another - one in which the main fault lines are cultural and generational, encapsulated by the networked Metropolitan youth versus the old left behind.

"Now, whether or not you agree with this analysis, she said, one of the key issues seems to be the use of binary narratives. The right versus wrong and the report [by St Paul's Insitute] calls for a politics and a broad public discourse based on a different language, a transcendent conversation, one that can address deeper discussions around questions of meaning, identity, belonging.

"This morning, she said, I want to suggest that the Christian faith offers such a language because at our heart is a sense of belonging, of identity and meaning that emerges from being made in the image of God, the imago Dei. It is a concept that I believe could contribute to this kind of transcendent conversation which is called for.

We have a culture of winners and losers - it is the Punch and Judy of politics, it is a state that we say we want to get away from but yet we still see it week by week in the Prime Minister's Question time, while politicians say that that's not all they do, it is often the only time that members of the public see them."

 She went on to speak about a future where people might not be demonized for holding a certain view and can debate with compassion.

It was encouraging to see how MPs from all parties related to each other with respect and good humour and gave me an insight into how our democracy works.

We live in anxious times – the future seems so uncertain. Here in Britain, we are waiting to see who will become the next Prime Minister, with the [outcome of Brexit](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-48833260) hanging over us. The Tory MPs I spoke too all believe Boris will be coronated soon – so watch out.

On a wider stage, the consequences of climate change are becoming ever more apparent. In the face of these challenges, rather than pulling together, societies are becoming more and more polarised. Britain is split down the middle over Brexit. And a UN human rights expert has warned of ‘[climate apartheid](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/25/climate-apartheid-united-nations-expert-says-human-rights-may-not-survive-crisis)’, where the rich pay to escape from hunger, while the rest of the world is left to suffer. Our ability to talk to each other across differences seems to be diminishing. Everyone wants to be heard, but no-one wants to listen. So much online ‘conversation’ is nothing but rant and insult. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the world wide web, has written an [open letter](https://webfoundation.org/2019/03/web-birthday-30/) condemning the ‘outraged and polarised tone and quality of online discourse’. The Archbishop fo Canterbury called this week for gentle and affirmiung conversation on social media.

[Jean Vanier](https://www.thetablet.co.uk/texts-speeches-homilies/4/1248/obituary-jean-vanier-1928-2019-), founder of [L’Arche](https://www.larche.org.uk/), who died recently, used to say that love doesn’t mean doing extraordinary or heroic things; it means knowing how to do ordinary things with tenderness.[[1]](#endnote-1) Some of the people we come across in our daily lives have obvious problems, but others are carrying invisible burdens. So it is worth treating everyone in a spirit of gentleness.

We have been looking at Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia these last two months and today is our final reading from the letter. People in the churches saw themselves as one particular ‘type’ of Christian, and looked down on other types. If they saw one of the others doing something wrong, they would feel smug; that, they would think, is not the way ‘we’ behave.

At the same time, these groups, were defined in terms of status, not detailed behaviour; ‘we’ (the Jewish Christians among them? Or perhaps the richer Christians? or the ones who were Roman citizens?) were simply different because they were different. Instead of the community Paul had established, where all were equal at the foot of the cross, all equally ‘In Christ’, all equally members of Abraham’s family, the work of the agitators had left a legacy of division based on non-theological factors.

It is desperately easy for this kind of attitude to creep into any church. Divisions in the wider society (class, income, colour, the sort of home you live in) can quickly lead one group of Christians to look down on another. Often the others sneer back. What has that got to do with the kingdom of God?

Paul might appear to contradict himself, saying first ‘bear one another’s burdens’ (Galatians 6.2) and then ‘all must carry their own loads’ (Galatians 6.5). But the combination makes sense.

Taking responsibility for ourselves – for our words and deeds, for the choices we make given our circumstances, for sustaining our own health and wellbeing – includes being honest about our mistakes and failures. Then we will have compassion on others for their failings.

Paul’s vision is the opposite of a blame culture. He advocates being realistic and gentle, both with ourselves and others.

When he says that this is ‘the law of Christ’ (Gal 6:2), he may be thinking of the saying preserved in Matthew 6.14 – ‘if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you’.

The law in question here is the law of love, the law of giving oneself in love and humility to the service of others. This, rather than showy behaviour which highlights one or two individuals, will be the sign that they are really spiritual. Jesus carried the cross for others, so Christians must carry one another’s burdens. If my neighbour sins today and I notice it, I must remember that it may well be me tomorrow. If it’s my responsibility to help put things right, I must do it without arrogance.

If you think you are something, someone special, then your attitude itself is evidence that you are not. You’re deceiving yourself – but probably nobody else.

Any church that takes these verses seriously will be on their way to the only victory that counts: the victory of the cross of Christ lived out in community and under the eyes of the wider world.

I remember a very emotional debate at general assembly of the URC about assisted dying. Should Christians support people who were suffering unbearably as a result of terminal illness, to receive medical assistance to die at their own request. The debate was complex and many moving stories were told. In the end the resolution that was passed was that we could not support legislation that would empower medical staff to intervene in ways which deliberately seek to assist a patient to die.

But in the middle of the debate a man stood up to share how his friend had motor neurone disease and was wasting away unable to help himself and who just wanted to die. In this wretched state he was pleading for assistance to end his life. The speaker’s voice broke and he became very emotional and tears formed in his eyes. He had to sit down and I noticed at that point the person who was sat behind him just leant forward and put his arm around him. The debate continued in a sensitive manner aware now of the human issues involved. When it came to a vote I noticed that the person who had put his arm round the man’s shoulder actually voted against assisted dying. They had disagreed but they had still born each other’s burdens.

The BBC is running a [Crossing Divides](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p078m6nl) season, to explore the power of bringing together people with conflicting opinions, across divisions of race, class, faith, politics and generation. So one episode had a taxi driver meeting an Uber driver. Another had a dairy farmer talking to a vegan. The stories include a [healing singalong](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-48691463) in which children with special needs and older people with dementia bring the best out of each other. A wonderful example of mutual uplifting.

How do we nurture a caring community when we’re all fallible, often reluctant to be honest, intimate and vulnerable, and prone to misunderstanding?

I met someone who is due to be ordained soon. He has spent four years training to be a minister. I asked him if his sending church had been supportive. He said no they haven’t been very caring at all. The minister had only been in touch at the beginning and end of his training. His elder had only contacted him a couple of times. What about other friends in the church I enquired? They had been in contact quite a bit. I said ‘how can you say that the church hasn’t cared therefore? The church is the people not just the minister or the elders.’

We talked a bit more about expectations on elders and ministers. I shared with him the stresses of being a minister, especially the unrealistic expectations. There’s no way a minister can be intimately aware of all the needs of all the church – its impossible, though most ministers, burn themselves out trying. This view of ministry and elders in fact is also unbiblical – the Bible has a view of the body ministry of the church; here - Paul says bear one another's burdens – don’t expect the minister nor the elders to carry them all. They are there for the leadership and oversight of pastoral care – but we are all in it together.

How can we create communities and fellowship were there is that mutual care of each other? Some people will be private and not want others to know their business – hopefully they will have some confidents – that’s their choice. But they will run the risk of isolation and people not being aware that they could’ve done with some support. The other extreme is where people try to burden others with their problems and don’t take enough responsibility for their own affairs.

Here is the paradox of genuine community living: When it comes to my neighbour I must be sure to remain humble if I offer help; when it comes to myself, I must recognize my own responsibility for my actions. ‘Carry each other’s burdens’ is balanced by ‘everyone has his own burden to bear’ in verse 5.

Paul goes on to say that you’ll reap what you sow. If church members sow to the spirit – think about the passage last week – the fruit of the spirit – love , joy , peace patience ,goodness kindness, faithfulness gentleness and self control’ – what we also looked at on our church weekend and I described as the work of the Spirit within us – forming us in the character of Christ - they themselves will in due course bring in a harvest..

There is a moral principle that you reap what you sow. If you are open hearted and generous you are likely to receive generosity back. If your mean fisted and closed down – you’re likely to be isolated. If you sow from your sinful side you’ll reap the consequences of that sin. God may forgive you your sins but you still will have to live the consequences of those sins. Scars remain. You can’t trade on the forgiveness of God – God won’t be mocked – or fooled as it in our version. There is a moral law in the universe – you reap what you sow.

Finally in verses 11-16 Paul writes his own summary of the themes of the letter. He thinks it necessary to challenge his opponents again for advocating circumcision. He believes them to be wrong because circumcision is a means of avoiding persecution, it is a boundary marker so you know you are part of the in crowd, and is born of a desire to show off. In sharp contrast Paul describes his own type of boasting. He boasts only of the cross of Christ (v. 14). By that cross he himself has been crucified to the world, to that sphere in which sin, law and death reign. Circumcision is unimportant to God because what matters to God is a new creation (v. 15). In verse 15 he writes ‘circumcision is nothing; uncircumicision is nothing; the only thing that counts is new creation’

Paul has got pretty angry in this letter to those who were urging the Galatians to get circumcised. Remember he even told them to go and castrate themselves in 5v12. But he rounds off his letter by saying if you are going to boast, boast in the cross – for there we are all equal – all receive mercy and grace.

The final words of this passionate letter, in which Paul has not withheld his frustration nor his opinions are words of grace: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you my friends. Amen.

1. Ann Cowley <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/102-july-august-2019-c/proper-9/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)