

Pentecost 3 – Wesley 9 & 10.30am – 9th June 2013

Theme: “Called by God”

Reading: Galatians 1:11-24 ‘Paul called by God’

Introduction

When I entered theological college way back in 1974 I was intrigued to see the background of my fellow students. Some had not finished high school while others had a degree or two. Several were farmers, a couple of teachers, one was a postman, another an investment broker, while another was a full-time mum and then there was me, a green-keeper. We were an incredibly mixed bunch called to begin our ministry training. I was the youngest being only twenty at that time. Christ calls an amazing variety of people to come, follow him. We are not all called to full-time ministry but we are called to be faithful disciples of Jesus. Look around – what an incredible bunch of people we are from a variety of walks of life. It has never ceased to amaze me the variety of people within the community of faith – called by God.

Galatians 1:11-24

One of the issues Paul had to contend with in his ministry was validating his ministry. They didn't have church committees and vetting processes initially in the early church to 'weed out' those not suitable for ministry and of course Paul came with a chequered background in regards his initial involvement in trying to destroy the early Christian community before his conversion on the Damascus road which is recounted in Acts chapter 9. As Paul was not one of the initial disciples who followed Jesus and learnt from him, there were those who were sceptical of his suitability and his teaching. Hence here in this letter to the churches of the region of Galatia, which probably included the ancient towns of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, (modern day Turkey) he gives them his testimony of how he became a follower of Christ. He does this at the beginning of the letter to set the scene that what he teaches is from Christ Jesus, to whom he bears witness.

Paul of course is about to 'give them a serve' for not following the Gospel. There were many Jewish Christians who believed, among other things, that a number of the ceremonial practices of the Hebrew Scriptures were still binding on the early church. Paul had of course witnessed to people in the regions of northern and southern Galatia and small worshipping groups of new Christians had begun through his evangelism. However some had fallen into old ways such as the need for circumcision and some didn't see Paul as an authentic apostle.

Hence in this passage Paul lays out his curriculum vitae as an apostle, lest any had forgotten: called from the womb like the ancient prophets, a Pharisee's Pharisee in his earlier life, acclaimed for his gospel ministry in other regions of the Near East. Paul remains steady in his self-validating proclamation that he received his gospel directly from God with no intermediaries to 'muddy the water' so to speak. Obviously some had insinuated that Paul's message was far more human than divine and here Paul counters that with his testimony.

That God made the persecutor into a proclaimer serves, in part, to counter whispering campaigns that would demote Paul to a lesser rank and undermine his proclamation of the Gospel. Paul uses this to conclude this section and say of the churches of Judea; "And they praised God because of me." in verse 24.

How does this relate to us?

I believe that it is especially good to reflect upon how we became a Christian and why we are still Christians. For me it makes a lot of sense, the Christian faith. The sense of community, saved by grace rather than anything I have done, the call to prayer, the example of Christ and the assurance of forgiveness all mean a great deal to me. In a sense, like Paul, I can point to an actual time when I became a Christian and the profound change it had on my life then and there as well as into the future. This is not the case with everyone but for me that has been incredibly sustaining through my ministry. God touched my life, in a mountaintop experience, at a specific time in my life when I was eighteen. It changed me forever, although there are times when I revert to the 'old self' and realise that I have strayed from Christ. Reflect today on your own Christian pilgrimage and give thanks to God for your Christian faith which gives another perspective to life itself.

Concluding story

In the book "More stories for the Heart" edited by Alice Gray there is the old story of 'The Lamplighter' by Marilyn McAuley (p252).

"As a young man, the lamplighter led a tough, wayward life. Some years after becoming a Christian, a former friend taunted him about his new lifestyle. The lamplighter finally said to him about becoming a Christian; 'The only way I can explain it is this: as I go down the street snuffing out the lights of the lamps, and I turn around, I see all that is dark behind me. That is how it was before I met Christ. However, when I continue down the street, the lamps before me light my path – that is how it is with Christ.'

The former friend asked, 'And how is it when you've snuffed out all the lamps?' The lamplighter replied, 'The dawn is coming.'"

Conclusion

In this passage we have the before and the after – the before Christ and the with Christ. May we be strengthened in our own faith to cope with what life brings to us. May we faithfully follow Christ each and every day. Amen.