

The Heart of the Gospel

(Luke 4:16-21)

‘You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?...’ – strong opening words from Paul.

Why was he so passionate?

To start to understand this we need to briefly look at the historical situation he was addressing:

His Gentile converts are in danger of being persuaded by Jewish Christians that they need to obey Jewish law (especially circumcision and observance of Holy days) in order to become complete Christians, members of God's people.

They had started off by believing the Gospel message which Paul had taught, and had received this message by faith and been filled with the Holy Spirit – proof of their acceptance by God. Judging by accounts of the early church in Acts, they would have had day to day experience of the Holy Spirit’s power in healing miracles and supernatural occurrences.

But now they are being side-tracked into thinking they must do something else in order to grow in their lives as Christians, an add-on to the Gospel. To use Paul’s words: they are being ‘bewitched’ by false teachers, maybe even Satan himself.

Paul is determined to help them see that this is ridiculous and appeals to their experience of the Holy Spirit, the fact that Abraham received righteousness by faith and the truth that faith is the only way.

Paul is astounded that the Galatians should have become distracted from their belief in the central Gospel truth and their experience of the power of the Holy Spirit by arguments over what they can eat, which festivals to celebrate and whether or not they should be circumcised. He exclaims:

‘Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?’ NIV

['Does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you because you do what the Law requires or because you hear the gospel and believe it?' GNB]

What about us? We're not going to be worrying about circumcision and the like but, in our church, could we be pre-occupied by our **own** peripheral issues, rather than being focussed on the central truth of the Gospel and the expectation of the powerful work of the Spirit?

Let's think of some of the topics which we have discussed either in the PCC or more generally over recent months.

We discuss our church services, especially any special/different ones and the style and choice of music. We think about how to encourage Bible study and prayer, children in our church,

[whether we have bread or wafers for communion]. Then there is the upkeep of our church buildings, *[the Cemetery]*, fundraising, and of course, the organisation of social events, often involving others in the community.

Many of these are really important things and some are connected with our Gospel mission so I'm not saying we shouldn't be talking about such things – we need to have these conversations. But it is so much easier to spend **all** our time and energy discussing practical things, things we can plan or do, rather than the more challenging and less controllable aspects of our Gospel commission – what we are called to be as God's church.

We heard that when Jesus announced **his** Gospel mission he said:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” (Luke 4:18-19 NIV)

*[“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free the oppressed*

*and announce that the time has come
when the Lord will save his people.” (Luke 4:18-19 GNB)]*

This is what Jesus came to do.

This is what he wants to continue to do through us in the world today.

But do we really see this in Chinley (*Hayfield*)?

We can be thankful to God for his love and grace in our lives and the growth and changes that we **do** see, but is that all we can hope for in our earthly lives? When we read the Bible, doesn't what we read inspire us to be hungry and expectant for more of God's Kingdom on earth right now? Wouldn't it be wonderful to see more of the powerful work of the Spirit and the presence of Jesus transforming lives, to see the good news of Jesus freeing people from whatever oppresses and blinds them? How amazing would it be to see the kind of thing that was happening when Jesus was on earth, and that we read about in the early church, of which Paul was reminding the Galatians.

It's great organising events and providing a friendly welcome, but what is it that makes us different from any of the other 'friendly' places in the village such as the [Pub or the Book group or Community Cinema?] [*Pub, Café, Cricket Club?*] Wouldn't it be great if people could really see the transforming presence of Jesus within us and among us?

Another thing we have discussions about is the type of worship songs or hymns we sing and the use of different musical

instruments, but just listen to the sheer joy in worship expressed by the psalmist when he says:

‘Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.’ (Psalm 100:1-2)

‘Clap your hands, all you peoples;
shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth.’ (Psalm 47:1-2)

How wonderful if our awareness of God’s awesome presence among us was so real that our worship was filled with this kind of joy! (whatever sort of of hymn we’re singing)

So what do we do about it? How can the heart of the Gospel become the centre of our lives and the life of our church?

In fact, do we even want our church to be like I’m describing or do we sometimes get so preoccupied with keeping it just as **we** like it that we are in danger of missing the point of its existence?

If we go back to Jesus’ description of his and our purpose, we see that the church is intended to be the power-house of mission, of changed lives, of broken, messy people finding love and transformation. This may mean disrupting our comfortable, familiar routines and that might be difficult for us. But what a wonderful privilege to be part of what God is doing in the world even if it does mean sacrifice on our part. Isn’t it worth it to see

more of the powerful work of the Spirit and the presence of Jesus turning peoples' lives around?

If all this sounds rather 'pie in the sky' there are real examples of where this is happening amongst present day congregations. We've heard amazing accounts of healing and changed lives in Africa from some members of our congregation but it happens in this country too!

I read about a church in Bedford and how they are seeing the power of God's Spirit working in wonderful ways, not only in the church but in the everyday lives of church members. For example, one lady tells of a visit to the hairdressers: The hairdresser was complaining about his back pain but then went on to explain that he had always suffered with it because he had one leg longer than the other, causing him to stand awkwardly. The conversation then moved on to other topics and the lady thought nothing of it. However, when she came to pay, he mentioned it again and light- heartedly offered to show her the difference in length of his legs. She was intrigued, so watched curiously as he sat on the floor with his back against the wall and legs out in front of him. As she bent down to look, she could clearly see the difference in length. She recalls how she had only really intended to be inquisitive but then found herself asking the man if she could pray for him. He agreed and as she prayed a simple prayer, they both watched in amazement.... until both legs were the same length. He then stood up and found that he was able to stand normally. – That's just one amazing story of an ordinary Christian lady in a very unremarkable setting, there are lots more.

Some are less dramatic examples of showing love and kindness to a friend, or even a stranger, leading on to the development of a very real encounter with God. (*Real Life Stories: Healing at the Hairdressers, 2014*)

You might hear that and think, as I'm inclined to do 'But I could never do things like that!' Well the truth is, I can't, but **God** can, if we'll only be hungry for him to work powerfully through us. The Galatians had seen the miraculous power of God at work amongst them but Paul was warning them that they were in danger of forgetting that and turning to powerless religious observance.

In another of his letters, Paul warns the Corinthian church not to be distracted: 'But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ'. (2 Corinthians 11:3). It's often easier to be devoted to church rather than 'pure devotion to Christ'. - I know I am far more comfortable talking to people about church, than about Jesus.

So, what can we do?

Well, Paul encouraged the Galatians to focus on what was really important. He begins and ends his rebuke with words along the lines of 'Remember that that vivid picture of Christ crucified, remember that he has taken our punishment so we can receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit!'

This is what makes our relationship with God possible. And God gives us the power to live our lives as Christians engaged in the wonderful work of living out the Gospel message.

Of course, (as I said before) the powerful, transforming presence of Jesus is not something **we** can make happen. But if it's what we really desire, we can come before God in prayer and repentance and ask **him** to make it a reality.

So let's be inspired by these words to the Galatians; to make the heart of the Gospel the centre of our lives, both individually and as a church, and not be pre-occupied with other things on the periphery (however worthwhile they may be).

Then we **will** see lives transformed, and God will be glorified here!

Reference

Real Life Stories: Healing at the Hairdressers. (2014, November 23rd). Retrieved January 16th, 2015, from kingsarms.org: <http://www.kingsarms.org/resources/stories-and-testimonies/message/healing-at-the-hairdressers.html>

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