

Daily Devotions from the URC

Galatians part 1

20th May – 2nd June 2018



Introduction

We start this booklet with John Proctor's reflections on Pentecost and then start to look at the Epistle to the Galatians. As ever we continue to work through the Free Church of Scotland's Psalter, Sing Psalms, on Sundays. We will also look at John and Charles Wesley and John Calvin – key thinkers whose work influences us now.

Galatians was probably addressed to believers in the Roman province of Galatia in what is now Turkey. Scholars agree that this is an authentic letter of Paul and was written to urge Gentile Christians not to follow the Jewish Law - especially to resist the temptation to be circumcised. The letter was written any time between the 40s and 60s and has been influential in the development of Christian theology.

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2000 years on in a dominantly gentile Church, it is hard for us now to imagine how bold and out on a limb Paul was in his Biblical, theological and cultural interpretation. Paul was compelled by his experience of Christ that the Realm of God was open to all without condition, if only we choose to accept it, trust it (trust God) and live in it. It was an outrageous idea. Does it sound too good to be true, outrageous to us today? Perhaps Paul offers us a challenge to look at our traditions and interpretations and ask where and how we have recreated Law, which Paul believed we were liberated from?

God is with us fulfilling the promises to Noah and to Abraham, accepting and working with us to bring abundant life to all. A free gift of grace, which comes with a warning that if we choose to follow Jesus' way of love and justice, we, and the whole world, will gain more than we could imagine but will also lose everything as it is forged and transformed into the Realm of God.

Prayer

Living God,
Open our eyes to see your Realm in our midst
Open our minds to interpret your Way in our context
Open our hearts to express your Gospel with courage
Open our lives to serve your Hope for all life.
Today and everyday Amen

gracious to all whom we meet. Free me from self-reliance and use me in this way today, to your eternal glory. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

Saturday 2nd June Galatians 3: 15-18

The Rev'd Fiona Bennett is Minister of Augustine United Church in Edinburgh

Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And to offsprings', as of many; but it says, 'And to your offspring', that is, to one person, who is Christ. My point is this: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

Reflection

The early church in Galatia heard the Gospel through Paul, but they later came under the influence of other teaching which proposed that Christians should continue to follow the Jewish Law, including circumcision. Paul believed that this undermined the Gospel, but realised that his understanding required a very different interpretation of Scripture which did not have a great bank of scholarship to support of his views. So, in Galatians, he is trying to express the story of Covenant / Promise / Law from a different perspective.

In today's passage, Paul points out that the promise to Abraham was made by faith before the Law came into being. This Promise was valid and was not nullified when the Law arrived. Paul goes on to argue the Law was a vehicle to reveal our need of God, but Jesus has shown that need is addressed by grace.

Table of Contents

Introduction2

Sunday 20th May Pentecost 1 Cor 12:3-13 Mixed blessing....4

Monday 21st May Galatians 1: 1 - 56

Tuesday 22nd May Galatians 1: 6- 97

Wednesday 23rd May Galatians 1: 10 - 129

Thursday 24th May John and Charles Wesley,11

Friday 25th May Galatians 1: 13-2413

Saturday 26th May John Calvin16

Sunday 27th May Psalm 48b18

Monday 28th May Galatians 2: 1-1020

Tuesday 29th May Galatians 2: 11-1423

Wednesday 30th May Galatians 2: 15-2124

Thursday 31st May Galatians 3: 1 - 526

Friday 1st June Galatians 3: 6 - 1428

Saturday 2nd June Galatians 3: 15-1830

Sunday 20th May Pentecost 1 Cor 12:3-13 Mixed blessing
The Rev'd John Proctor is a URC member in Cambridge, and General Secretary of the URC

I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Reflection

Pentecost. Birthday of the church. Festival of the Holy Spirit. A high and holy day in the Church year. These verses from 1 Corinthians were written to remind a tense and divided company of Christians about the life they shared, in Christ and with one another. The key themes are parity and variety: we are equal yet different; one body in Christ and richly diverse as members of it.

Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Reflection

The elegant lyrics of a track titled "Thank You, Jesus" (Hillsong) roll out, "Grace that flows like a river, washing over me, fount of heaven, love of Christ, overflow in me. Thank you Jesus, you set me free, Christ my saviour, you rescued me."

This Hillsong song neatly summarises a contemporary rendering of Galatians 3: 6-14. Here St Paul teaches that God's grace in Christ displaces the demands of Law. Paul counsels: live trusting in the grace of Christ for the Law cannot save you.

Paul's letter was a circular to all the communities in the Roman province of Galatia. He appeals to Christians there not to be pressed into Judaizer theology but to rely exclusively and completely on the grace of Christ.

Incredibly, it is a discussion that never seems to lose its relevance to the Church. In an age where 'law' seems to have lost its stranglehold on society, we still need to be reminded to rest in, to trust in the grace of Christ.

If 'grace' is God's unmerited favour, then where in your own life today is Christ's grace evident? How do you grace others in your personal life, church community, and world? The challenge of Scripture to us is to give grace as much as you have received it. Will you pray for one person in your circle who needs you to show them grace today.

Prayer

Loving God, your grace is infinite in depth and width and height. Fill me – and your church today, with your Holy Spirit so that we may be

their potential for Christians if we try to have them without Christ. To believe otherwise would be foolish.

Prayer

We thank you, God
That you have made yourself known to us in Jesus Christ.
Give us the wisdom of your Holy Spirit, we pray,
To order the life of your Church,
And to live in your world,
With Christ as the enlivening cause
Of all we think and say and do.
Amen.

Friday 1st June Galatians 3: 6 - 14

*The Rev'd Craig Morrison, Randpark Ridge United Church,
Johannesburg, a Minister of the United Congregational Church of
Southern Africa*

Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.' Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.' But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, 'Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'— in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of

The Spirit gives parity. Christians are in this together. None of us could believe in the risen Jesus, unless the Spirit had kindled that faith within us (v3). Each of us can contribute to the life of the fellowship, in ways that make the Spirit known (v7). All of us have received a touch of the Spirit through the poured water of baptism (v13). We are one. None is greater or better than the rest. All stand on one level - the Spirit level. That is an essential part of being Christian.

The Spirit also gives variety. Because we worship and work together, we cannot afford to be clones and copies of one another. How boring, monochrome and ineffective the church would be if we were. Thank God, the Spirit gives different gifts, varied patterns of service, distinct streams of grace and goodness that flow through and from the lives of Christ's people. The blessing of the Spirit is, in that sense, a mixed blessing, a sweet and wholesome blend, as each of us shares with others what God has shared with us.

So how does Christ's presence in your life enrich the lives of other people? What have you gained from your faith, and how do others gain from that? And how does Christ's presence in other people enrich you? Even - especially - people who are unlike you may have much to contribute to your Christian experience, to show you and share with you of the life of Christ. Pentecost is a day to celebrate all of this.

Prayer

Pentecost God, of breath and flame,
coming to the one and the many,
showing Jesus among us and within us,
sharing grace and spreading gifts,
teach us to give and receive in Christian fellowship,
to delight and depend on Jesus,
and to nurture the life of his body, the Church. Amen.

Monday 21st May Galatians 1: 1 - 5

The Rev'd David Whiting is Minister of Sunderland and Boldon URC Partnership in the Northern Synod.

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— and all the members of God's family who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Reflection

Today we begin a series of devotions based upon Galatians. The letter begins in a way that is used in many letters of the time. That is the sender, who in this case is Paul, writes to the recipients, who are the churches of Galatia, then follows a word of greeting. Being Paul he departs from mere greeting and fills these opening words with theology.

Paul wants to say something about his credentials and he makes the point that no human agency has given him the title apostle, this title comes from Jesus Christ and God the Father. Paul doesn't work alone. In other letters he refers to his associates by name, here we just told that it is those who are with him who are part of God's family.

Who are the churches in Galatia? The word Galatia is derived from the same word as the words 'Gaul' or 'Gaelic', it seems to have been likely that they were Celts. There are two suggestions about where the churches in Galatia were situated. On the one hand the term may refer to those who migrated into Asia Minor and settled there in the third century BC on the other hand it may refer to the Roman Province which was designated as such in 25 BC. The former is to the north of what is now central Turkey and the latter is to the south.

nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

Reflection

I wonder what it would take for a United Reformed Church minister to tell the members of a URC congregation that they were all idiots. I think that it would take a lot, and that's not just because of the likely consequences for the minister, whether they wrote it in a letter or, even more "courageously", declared it from the pulpit.

Granted, Saint Paul gives the impression of being someone never afraid to say it as he sees it, as Saint Peter could have told you after their set-to in Antioch (2:11-14). Yes, Paul was a passionate character, capable of language even more cutting (see 5:12), but this is not about one man's personality; this is about a big faith issue.

Asked to define a church many people describe a building. Asked to explain the URC many of us begin with how we organise ourselves differently from other Christians, perhaps referencing Elders and Church Meeting. Saint Paul would not be impressed and would not hesitate to tell us so: "Foolish URC ones! Who has bewitched you! Does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by virtue of you having Elders and Church Meeting?"

Our Christian identity starts by knowing about Christ, so maybe we would be better to start by pondering a question like, "When did I first hear about Jesus Christ and recognise this as good news?"

There's nothing necessarily wrong with Elders or Church Meetings, or many formal and informal rules of church life. Just like the Hebrew scriptures, which includes Jewish law, they can be a great resource for our shared life. They don't make us Christian, however, and we spurn

Jesus, interpreting for each moment what is the most Gospel move we can make.

Prayer

Our dear and glorious God,
We're in wonder with your patience.
You see what we do and how we interpret,
and instead of anger, you give what we can rely on.
You gave your Law as a way of honouring each other and loving you,
yet you saw how piecemeal our ancestors and we have lived out
your hope and promise of justice.
Jesus gave us sharper focus, incisive generosity, and shocking
promises, taking our interpretations of your Law out from under our
feet and easing Law into our hearts.
Forgive us when we choose to interpret laws and rules and
guidelines and requirements in ways which are anything but loving.
Forgive, as ever, wise and exuberant God.
Give us grace to accept your wisdom deep in our souls.
Let us live Law and Gospel, alive to bring practical hope and
meaningful care.
In the name of Jesus, and in the power and presence of Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Thursday 31st May Galatians 3: 1 - 5

The Rev'd Trevor Jamison is Environmental Chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for

Paul greets the Galatian churches with a common greeting of grace and peace coming from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins in order to liberate from this present evil age. Paul is not only thinking about freedom from another world but is mainly thinking of those things that oppress us, things as greed, racial division, and materialism.

In these few words Paul refers both to resurrection and the sacrificial death of Christ, matters that we will read more of in this letter and in others of Paul's writings.

Prayer

Gracious God,
you come to us in Christ,
giving of himself for our sins,
raised from the dead by you,
bringing liberation from things that oppress,
from those things that prevent us from drawing to you.
We thank you for messengers like Paul,
and others through the ages,
who demonstrate to us,
something of you love and concern for us,
who share the message of good news.
To you be glory for ever and ever. Amen

Tuesday 22nd May Galatians 1: 6- 9

The Rev'd Ian Fosten, Norwich Area URC, Team leader

Reading

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an

angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Reflection

On a first reading of this passage it can seem like we are being given a stiff dose of non-negotiable, orthodox belief and the urgent command to stick to it - or else! Sadly, down the centuries this has been a feature of many otherwise well-intentioned religious and political movements, for whom high-minded ideals end up becoming hard and fast rules and those who question them are labelled heretics or unacceptable deviants.

But look and listen more closely to Paul and you will discover that this not so for him. What prompts Paul's strong words is not deviation from a strict set of party rules, rather it is a deliberate attempt by some to undermine the extraordinary gift of freedom in the Spirit, which lies at the heart of a Gospel of gracious forgiveness, by creating unnecessary hoops for new converts to jump through. From his own experience, Paul knows that we are confined neither by the inevitably dire consequences of our past actions, nor by rigid doctrines, rather, we are welcomed into a marvellously enabling relationship with God whom we meet in Jesus - a relationship which enables us to live fully and well and, as such, make our unique contribution with God's Kingdom.

The challenge I hear in today's reading is to make sure that in my relationships, in church, in all my work I strive to create a 'hoop free zone' in order that all whom I have dealings with are given their best chance to grow freely as the Spirit leads and enjoy those wonderful, life-enriching gifts which we'll read about in a few chapters' time!

that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Reflection

My word, dear Paul gives a lot of jargon whilst robustly criticising the Law. I empathise with his reasons and with his pain in the struggle. Yet, our glorious Jewish family, deeply connected with us by faith DNA, affirms that we live the Law to demonstrate that we love and honour God and the Other. It's not about making us right with God because God does that. So if Law is love, what of this Jesus Christ? If, because of Jesus, we are now so intimately connected with God, that faith in Jesus excites the Holy Spirit within us, what does that say about Law? Is my physical God connection all I need?

To me, Paul was in an utter twizzle trying to understand his old faith and his new one. To realise that we humans are the Spirit's temple, that the connection is physical alongside emotional and intellectual, must have made the Law seem completely redundant - especially if following it might exclude new Christians. Frustratingly, it is so easy to misunderstand and to misuse law; to use it for negative judgement and human control rather than for human care and justice. Law is for those times when humans forget how to live with and love one another. Let's be careful of dying to it. We believe Jesus came to fulfil the Law, not obliterate it. Jesus takes us further than Law, argues each interpretation, pushes us to see beyond, urges from inside our bodies to take on more gracious sight as we look to each other and to our world. We die not to the Law, but to the notion of it being the only guide of our lives. Wise Jeremiah prophesied that the Law would live in our hearts. We live with Law and Gospel, alive with resurrected

“properly” be in fellowship, Cephas and the other Jewish Christians suddenly side with them. The Gentiles are seemingly excluded from fellowship. This was no minor triviality but cuts to the heart of the Gospel. Are some people excluded from God’s call to join His community on earth?

This warns us of the damage that can be inflicted on people in the name of respectability. Paul challenged Cephas for his hypocrisy and inconsistency regarding his relationship towards the Gentile Christians. They were completely loved and accepted by God, therefore welcome in His community.

Prayer

God, thank you for calling us into a living community that you guide through the social wilderness.
Jesus, thank-you that you level the playing field so that we are all equally welcome in the eyes of God.
Holy Spirit, thank you for starting to make us whole
- repairing the damage and bringing genuine love into our lives.
Help us to be welcoming, help us to be welcomed. Amen.

Wednesday 30th May Galatians 2: 15-21

The Rev’d Elizabeth Gray-King is the URC Education & Learning Programme Officer and a member of St Columba’s URC, Oxford

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate

Prayer

God of life and love,
by your Spirit enable me to be
always a creator and
never a limiter
of opportunity
within the lives of all
whom you entrust into
my care. Amen.

Wednesday 23rd May Galatians 1: 10 - 12

The Rev’d David Scott is minister of Duke Street and Saughtonhall URCs in Edinburgh.

Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Reflection

An underlying theme of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is that they have gone too far. Having listened to Paul these former Gentile Galatians have converted to Christianity but have been heavily influenced by a group of Jewish Christian evangelists. They followed Paul and as far as he was concerned, they undermined his teaching resulting in much confusion.

This must have been frustrating for Paul. He has been to Galatia where for many his message has been received and accepted. Paul is clear in what this is and as the Jesus movement gained momentum he moved on. However, for others the message is not so clear as they try and

weave together and negotiate a union of the old and the new. This seems like good middle ground. It's safe and should keep everyone happy - but according to Paul they have missed the point.

Finding the safe middle ground position is often where we focus our attention through compromise and balance. This might not always be an easy option of course but even if it sparks argument and debate, at least it should keep most people happy when a conclusion is reached. In doing so, is there a danger that by making this our prime objective we too miss the point?

As Paul emphasises to the Christians in Galatia, we are not called to simply keep people happy and navigate the path of least resistance to achieve this. We must always be listening for the whispers and discerning God's will before stepping out with courage and faith. As Paul emphasises, the message he brings is not of human origin. This should therefore make us think, inspire us to act and take us to new places if we truly wish to be servants of Christ.

Prayer

God of grace,
In this moment I seek stillness.
In this moment let me reach beyond my past experiences.
Give me a sharpness of vision
as I hope for a glimpse of your presence.
Give me a clarity of hearing as I listen for your whispers.
Show me how to be a servant of Christ.
Show me what to say and what to do.
In moments of stillness and calm and in moments of noise and chaos;
grant me the courage to ensure your will is done.
Amen

Tuesday 29th May Galatians 2: 11-14

Daniel Harris is an ordinand at Westminster College

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

Reflection

We live in a time where many people are struggling with loneliness and feel excluded from mainstream society. How should the Church respond?

I know a biker who goes to church regularly. He wears a "traditional" biker's cut-off: a leather or denim waistcoat displaying various badges, patches and his club's coat-of-arms (or "colours"). The club's logo is a symbol of association within the biker community. It is claimed that such clothing exemplifies the stereotypical aggressive biker image.

When he wears his cut-off to church, his fellow Christians seem to avoid him. But when he leaves his cut-off at home Christians are more friendly to him. This is despite the fact that he has been worshipping at the church for many years.

Today's reading demonstrates a similar situation. A mixture of Gentile and Jewish Christians had been gathering for the deeply symbolic act of eating together. Cephas (or Peter) had been mixing comfortably for a while. When a group of hard-liners arrive, who insist that the Gentile Christians must be circumcised (another act of association) to

of life issues; the nature of ministry adapting to changing social patterns; missiological priorities in a multi-faith environment . Now none of these is a perfect match for the early Church's struggles , though some seem keen to hark back to issues that were not (and maybe cannot) be resolved. But we can learn much from this passage.

Paul's missionary journeys continued, reaching out to all countries which enjoyed (or bore) Pax Romana. The outcome of this meeting in Jerusalem was decisive in this regard – it did not hinder his missionary drive – bringing the gospel word to all who would listen. And 'face to face' is best. These priorities our church must retain, despite grappling with contentious issues. 'The Lord has yet more light and truth to shine forth from his word'.

Prayer

Gracious God
listening for your word to us
takes time and concentration,
sometimes beyond us
but always for our benefit.
In the midst of competing voices
we hear your call for generosity,
of spirit, in speech and always action.
We pray that fresh understandings of
your Gospel invigorates our mission
to share the good news with others. Amen

Thursday 24th May John and Charles Wesley,
Evangelists, Hymn Writers, 1791 and 1788
The Rev'd Colin Hunt is a retired minister, worshipping at Hutton & Shenfield Union Church in Essex

Information

Born at Epworth Rectory in Lincolnshire, John Wesley was the son of an Anglican clergyman and a Puritan mother. He entered Holy Orders and, following a religious experience on this day in 1738, began an itinerant ministry which recognised no parish boundaries. This resulted, after his death, in the development of a world-wide Methodist Church. His spirituality involved an Arminian affirmation of grace, frequent communion and a disciplined corporate search for holiness. His open-air preaching, concern for education and for the poor, liturgical revision, organisation of local societies and training of preachers provided a firm basis for Christian growth and mission in England.

Charles shared with his brother John the building up of early Methodist societies, as they travelled the country. His special concern was that early Methodists should remain loyal to Anglicanism. He married and settled in Bristol, later in London, concentrating his work on the local Christian communities. His thousands of hymns established a resource of lyrical piety which has enabled generations of Christians to re-discover the refining power of God's love. They celebrate God's work of grace from birth to death, the great events of God's work of salvation and the rich themes of eucharistic worship, anticipating the taking up of humanity into the divine life.

John died in 1791 and Charles in 1788.

Reading: Ezekiel 2. 1-5

The Lord God said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

Reflection

Israel was at a low ebb. With the exception of the elderly and the weak the nation had been captured and taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar. Ezekiel's calling was to minister to those in exile. Ezekiel was a street preacher rather than one who used the pulpit in the local synagogues. Our study passage today speaks of his call to awaken the exiles to God's presence regardless of whether or not they took notice whilst in a strange land. The underlying issue was how they would respond to the challenge. God gave Ezekiel the difficult task of declaring God's will to a people who were so wrapped up in their situation that they would not listen, but regardless, he was encouraged not to be afraid and to speak out.

On this day in 1738, John Wesley found himself in a similar position. He, and his brother Charles had returned from a mission to the Native American in Georgia. Like the exiles in Babylon they did not listen. John and Charles returned to London feeling dejected. John records in his journal that on this day he attended a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London. Luther's preface to Romans was being read at which point John records "I felt my heart strangely warmed, I did trust in Christ and Christ alone, for salvation."

to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

Reflection

This passage should be read by those of us who are inclined to be starry eyed about how the Church should be. It reveals that from early years the Church was no stranger to conflict.

On more than one occasion the apostle Paul feels he has been misrepresented and needs to argue his case. The back story is that Paul was not one of the original 'Twelve' nor, apparently, had he been properly accredited by the Jewish Christian authorities in Jerusalem.

With this background, Paul's missionary journeys to the Gentiles were regarded with suspicion by some Jewish Christians promoting traditional values. One of these traditions concerned circumcision of Gentiles. Circumcision was not a practice enjoined by Jewish law, but was widely regarded as the sine non qua of the Jewish male. Paul's universal gospel of redemption through the death of Christ cut loose Gentile converts from many Jewish traditions. The battle between the traditionalists and the modernisers joined.

If we wish to update this scenario consider two theological wings – the conservative and the liberal; our debates in the United Reformed Church about human sexuality; the nature of authority in the URC; end

place may evoke the same feelings and ideas about God that we find in today's Psalm – feelings of safety and peace, celebration and joy, love and righteousness. We may feel we gain strength from our place of sanctuary to face a world in which God's presence is sometimes difficult to find.

Prayer

Companion God,
Help me to find a place of sanctuary in you today.
In each task that awaits,
may I feel your safety and peace,
celebration and joy,
love and righteousness.
Draw me ever closer to you
and grant me strength
as I encounter everything that this day holds.

Monday 28th May Galatians 2: 1-10

The Rev'd John Young is a retired URC minister in the Synod of Scotland and a member of Giffnock URC

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us— we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference

Like Ezekiel, he became a street preacher, in market places and other centres of population. We too are today surrounded by people with fears and doubts. Often, we seemingly are unable to respond to their needs. Can we also be challenged, by meeting people where they are and respond to their doubts and fears by sharing the joy of knowing Jesus as Lord by both word and example thus revealing a new lease in life, a lease offering both freedom and security.

Prayer

Gracious God,
forgive us when we fail to respond to the needs of others,
especially when sharing your word would bring
both comfort and hope.
Make us more sensitive to the needs of people
who are outside the fellowship in which we worship you.
Enable us to leave what might be our comfort zone,
and like Ezekiel and John and Charles Wesley
meet people where they are,
responding to their needs,
in Jesus name. Amen.

Friday 25th May Galatians 1: 13-24

The Rev'd Dr Rosalind Selby is principal of Northern College in Manchester and a member of Didsbury URC.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before

me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me.

Reflection

The story of the conversion of Saul is so well known that "Damascus Road experience" has passed into our language. Perhaps less 'on our radar' is the period after those few days and before Paul's missionary journeys began. Here Paul gives us a glimpse into his experiences during those 12 years. He's giving mixed messages but in a helpful way if we are looking for a discernment model – for ourselves or as local churches or even as a denomination.

Paul's first instinct seems to be to say – I'm not being guided by human beings but by God. God's is the voice I'm listening to. God's is the guidance. God's is the grace in 'my' calling. But, he's also showing us that he did consult – eventually. He talked to Cephas (Peter) and to James in Jerusalem (then the centre of the Church).

In our Conciliar Structure (Church Meeting, Synod, Assembly) we are discerning together the will of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many of us will have experienced meetings where one or two voices have spoken and clearly been the word we needed to hear that makes the way clear, brings peace, or offers a motivating challenge. Both being open to God the opinions of others, together, is the wholeness of how we govern ourselves.

Your strong right hand is filled with righteousness.
11 To Zion your great deeds bring joyfulness,
And Judah's villages are filled with mirth.

12 Walk round and count the towers of Zion's hill.
13 Note well her ramparts and her citadels,
And speak of them to your posterity.
14 For this God is our God eternally,
And to the end our God will guide us still.

Reflection

Psalm 48 is a community song, celebrating God's reign over the earth. In the Psalm we are invited to survey Zion and marvel at the great city of God. The Psalm may have formed part of the liturgy at the Feast of Tabernacles when the people came to Jerusalem in order to commemorate the provision of God during their wandering in the wilderness.

The Psalm proclaims that God is great and the city of God's dwelling is holy because of the presence of God. Jerusalem has become the high mountain dwelling place of God; the city is now the holy mountain. The city is both beautiful and full of joy and yet an invincible fortress, so that invading armies quake as they approach in attack. God's attributes are celebrated, particularly God's love, righteousness and judgements. The people are called to process around the city to experience for themselves the strength and protection of God so that they might pass their experience on to future generations.

Psalm 48 celebrates the safety and peace of Jerusalem as a sanctuary in which God dwells. We will each have places of sanctuary - it may be a mountain top or an ancient place of worship; it may be a place we go to alone, or one where we are blessed by the presence of others. There will a whole range of places where we find refuge and a place to feel secure in the presence of God. Being in our sanctuary

Prayer

Dynamic God,
Speak through our hearts today,
As you spoke all those years ago to Calvin.
Helps us be engines of change,
And voices for the poor and marginalised
Send us out as your people, filled with your love
To do your work, and make your Kingdom come
Amen

Sunday 27th May Psalm 48b

*The Rev'd Lindsey Sanderson, East Kilbride and Hamilton Joint
Pastorate*

1 Great is the LORD—his praise all else excels—
In our God's city, on his holy hill.

2 Mount Zion is the joy of all the earth,
So high and fair like mountains of the north;
Here is the city where the Great King dwells.

3 God is the fortress of Jerusalem.

4 When kings joined forces, ready to advance,

5 They looked, and fled in terror and surprise,

6 Gripped like a woman who in childbirth cries.

7 Like ships destroyed by storm, you shattered them.

8 As we have heard, now we have seen it so

Within the city of Almighty God—

The city of the LORD, which by his grace

9 He makes secure. Within your holy place

Your never-failing love we seek to know.

10 O God, your name is known throughout the earth,

And to its farthest shores your praise goes forth;

Another example is in the testing of a sense of calling in a range of lay, commissioned or ordained roles. That calling is tested through personal prayer and consultation; both are needed. No-one can insist that 'God is calling me to XYZ' if that inner sense of certainty hasn't been tested by the Councils of the Church.

This Pauline wrestling of divine and human tension is a good discipline in many areas of our church life. Perhaps this could also be an encouragement to any who chair the Church Meeting to do our best to ensure this is what really happens. And perhaps, too, this is a word to anyone exploring a sense of calling – each person's sense of God's word to them does need to be tested by the wider Church in its (God-guided) humanity.

Prayer

God
be with us in our meeting together
in all our humanity
in all our wrestling.

God
guide us in our decision-making
as we listen to you
and to each other.

God
keep calling
keep calling us to discipleship
keep making it clear what that looks like for each person.

God
bless the places of discernment
may we be humble
to hear what others have to say

for they – and I – are part of the Body of Christ together
I'm not in this on my own.

For we ask it in Jesus' Name. Amen

Saturday 26th May John Calvin

Dan Morrell, currently attending St Andrew's, Roundhay, Immediate-Past Youth Assembly Moderator

Information

The French reformer John Calvin was born at Noyon in Picardy in 1509 and, since he was intended for an ecclesiastical career, he received the tonsure and his first benefice at the age of twelve, not untypical at this time.. Two years later he began studying theology at Paris but for some reason changed to law and moved to Orléans where he came under his first Protestant influences. He broke with the Roman Catholic Church in 1533, having had a religious experience which he believed commissioned him to purify and restore the Church of Christ. The first edition of his Institutes appeared in 1536, being a justification of Reformation principles. Calvin accepted a position in Geneva which involved organising the Reformation in that city and, after a sojourn in Strassburg, spent the rest of his life there. His pre-eminence could be seen in that he wrote to the Protector Somerset in England indicating to him what changes he felt should be made and corresponded similarly with other nations' leaders. During all this, his literary output never wavered. His immense reputation and influence have continued in the churches of the Reform to the present day. He died on this day in 1564.

Reading *Isaiah 6. 1–8*

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were

in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

Reflection

"Here I am send me to be your hands and feet, here I am send me I will go", these are the words of the bridge in Vicky Beeching's song 'Break Our Hearts'. Powerful words, words God wants to be hearing from us! The second verse of the song goes: "It's time to move outside our comfort zones, to see beyond our churches and our homes. To change the way we think and how we spend, until we look like Jesus again". I'm grateful to the work and words of, particularly Lawrence Moore, focussing on how we can be a more Jesus-shaped people, in a Jesus-shaped Church, making a Jesus-shaped difference. The words of Vicky Beeching very much resonate with this idea. Calvin's work also hinted at something like this too: Living our lives and proclaiming God's sovereignty to the world. Research says there's nothing to dislike about Jesus, a large majority of people see Jesus as someone positive. However these same people's opinions on Church are, however, far less positive. How do we solve that? Make Church look more like Jesus! Our churches need to ensure that no-one is left out, that they are places of welcome, places of sanctuary. They need not be confined by the four walls but be outgoing and open to change.