

## C Trinity 4 - Holy Trinity 2010

I think St Paul is a bit over fond of lists of does and don'ts. They often crop up in his letters and frankly I find them a bit unhelpful. In fact the Letter to Christians in Galatia is Paul at his most school masterish. I can see him wagging his finger at naughty children. Now Christopher no drunkenness! Now George, don't do that! And he does go rather overboard about sex, fornication and orgies, what's the difference. And what exactly is gross indecency? Of course I'm being a bit unkind to St Paul, but sometimes he does lend himself to being sent up.

He had a rather gloomy view of the world around him, and he wasn't alone. Rome in the second half of the first century was a violent abandoned place. When Tacitus came to write his history of the period (which included the year of the four emperors and widespread social unrest all within a decade of Paul's letter) he wrote, "I am entering upon the history of a period, rich in disasters, gloomy with wars, rent with seditions, savage in its very hour of peace . . . all was one delirium of hate and terror; slaves were bribed to betray their masters, freedmen their patrons. He who had no foe was destroyed by his friend." From the death of Augustus to the reign of Trajan and the golden age of the Antonines, it was one long age of terror. Juvenal viewed the gloomy scene with his usual cynicism. "The nation no longer brings forth any but bad men and cowards. Hence God, whoever he is, looks down, laughs at them and hates them." For him the Gods might laugh but Suetonius could see the despair just below the surface. "It was an age stricken with the agitation of a soul no longer master of itself." I don't think Rome was so much immoral, as amoral. So I give all these quotes because this is the backdrop to Paul's ministry. For many, Christianity was the faith which healed the agitation of the soul.

It was from this despair this lack of a moral consensus, this flouting of convention and rejection of restraint that Paul was trying to protect his new Christians. He was talking to people who were really very much like us. Except perhaps in one way, they were all recent converts to Christianity. Most of us have been in the faith for a long time, in fact brought up as Christians. We have to understand *that*, if we are to understand what Paul is trying to do. Paul was saying to his people that there had to be a real difference between their community and the communities from which they had come. **"For once you were darkness,"** he wrote to the new Christians in Ephesus, **"but now in the Lord you are light."** And he went on, **"for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."** Christians are called to be part of God's family and that does imply that we are going to be more loving and less selfish than perhaps we might be otherwise. That doesn't mean that we always behave better than other people, of course not, sadly. But it does mean that if we are claiming to be the people of God, there is an inbuilt challenge to us to behave as if we are. Paul looked around at the society he lived in and found no place for the God of Love and Compassion personified in Jesus. Corinth was a city renowned for its wild night life, at the Temple of Diana in the heart of the city, there were over a thousand sacred prostitutes dedicated to her cult. To be called a Corinthian in the Roman world suggested wild parties and heavy drinking. To the new Christians there, he wrote, **"Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, prostitution, the greedy, robbers, drunkards....none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."** In other words they have no place in the church. We might want to question such a blanket rejection. But again we have to remember the society around him that he was warning about. As he said at the end,

**“And that is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified...in the name of the Lord Jesus.”** And Paul drew another distinction as well, if disputes arose, then people were always to remember that they were one in each other, as they were one in the church, the Body of Christ. So problems were to be settled in love within the community of faith; **“Do not dare to take it before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints.”**

These initially small groups of ordinary people were just like you and me, called out of the world to be the people of God. Jesus said, **"You did not choose me. no I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last; and then the Father will give you anything you ask in my name. What I command you is to love one another."**

Have you heard that four liner? How odd, of God, to choose, the Jews? Well never mind the Jews, how odd of God to choose me. How odd of God to choose us. We all know in ourselves just how far short of our calling that we fall. How mixed are our motives, how quick we are to doubt others, how easy we find it to justify ourselves, how hard it is to overlook the short comings in others. As has been said to me many times, and in all honesty I have to agree, I am not the most obvious choice to be a priest

But Jesus chose me, and Jesus chose you.

Of course we don't have to face what the first Christians faced. And compared with them we live in a time of incredible peace and prosperity, a longer peace and a greater prosperity than we Europeans have ever known. But that brings with it its own dangers because we are tempted to believe that we have no need of God; and our growing knowledge and sophistication suggests that maybe there is no God anyway. The emptiness of so many churches, is testimony to that. We don't have to face a hostile world exactly, more an indifferent and slightly contemptuous one.

The first Christians were called to be witnesses as Jesus said, in a violent, uncertain and corrupt world. We have been called as witnesses in an indifferent, sceptical and self centred world. We are certainly not persecuted, a very curious notion in Madeira, we are just ignored. I think that is just as big a challenge as any the church has had to face. But what we are called to *be*, has not changed and what we are called to *do*, has not changed. *In being*, we are called to show in our lives, in an often troubling world, the love he showed to us. *In doing*, we are called to share the message of hope and life with all who will hear us.