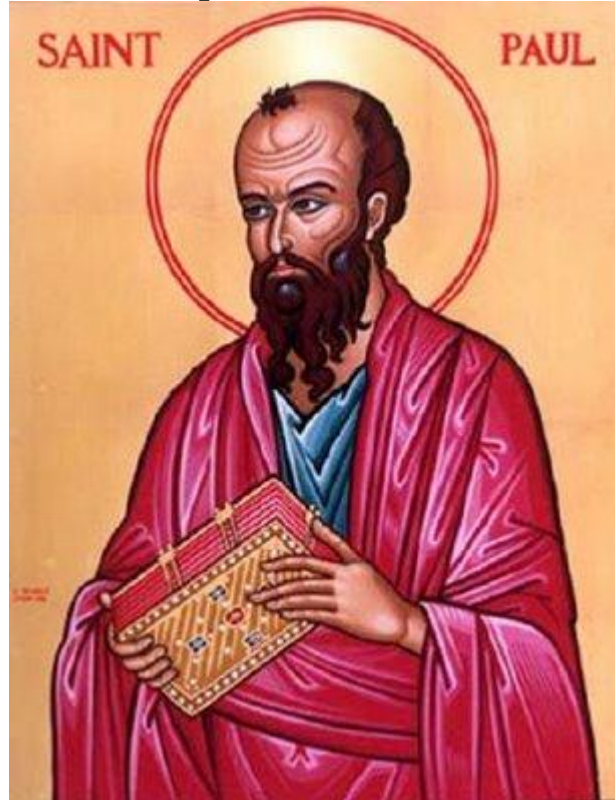




28 October 2012
The Feast of Saint Simon and Saint Jude
Choral Evensong
Isaiah 45 vv. 18–25
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Inspirational Leaders



Paul of Tarsus: An Inclusive leader

By The Rev'd Dr Michael Thompson
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If you google 'St Paul' and 'inclusive', you won't find much about the man. Lots of links to all-inclusive package holidays at a bay in Malta, and web pages for churches named after the apostle, but not much expounding how inclusive this early Christian leader was. Some today perceive the zealot from Tarsus as a villain, a dogmatic, narrow little man who turned the simple teaching of Jesus into a religion that Christ himself wouldn't recognize. Certainly texts from Paul have been used down through the centuries not to include but to oppress, justifying the continuation of slavery, the silencing and exclusion of women, and bigoted behaviour towards various groups within and outside the Church.

So is the title of my sermon a mistake? Shouldn't there have been a question mark after saying 'Paul of Tarsus: An inclusive leader'? I originally suggested that to your chaplain, Liz. But I was being provocative. I chose the final form of my title because there is a world of difference between what the letters of Paul actually say and what people have done with them. These are two very different things. His life, his ministry, his writings stood for a radical inclusiveness—even if others through history have twisted them, taking verses out of context to justify attitudes that he would have abhorred.

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But Paul wasn't always keen on inclusion. Given the Jewish name Saul at birth, he was one of the elite, a Roman citizen, and he had a first rate education. Some of it may have been in the fine university town of Tarsus where he was born, but his higher education came at the feet of the most progressive and celebrated rabbi of the day in Jerusalem, Gamaliel, grandson of the great Hillel. Gamaliel was famous for his knowledge of Torah (the Jewish law) and teachings about purity, but he also loved the Greek language. He was more tolerant of outsiders, advocated fairer treatment of women, and relaxed restrictions on how far one could travel on the Sabbath. Acts 23 depicts Gamaliel as counselling the Sanhedrin to be lenient on the apostles. Despite his excellent teacher, we don't see that attitude in his young student, Saul from Tarsus.

Saul the Pharisee utterly rejected the idea that a man hung on a tree could be the promised deliverer of Israel. And he found the teachings of Jesus' followers too threatening. With the zeal of a member of the Taliban, he was there at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Paul's religious fervour led him to further violence. He actively hunted down other Christians with a vengeance that sounds all too familiar to us today. But on the road to Damascus the unthinkable happened. He encountered the risen Lord whose followers he was persecuting. And suddenly the man who was keen on shutting out others realized that despite his own great sin, he himself was forgiven and included—by the one he had so vigorously opposed.

Saul the exclusive Pharisee became Paul the inclusive apostle of Jesus Christ. And fundamental to that change in his thinking was the grace of God. Not mercy, but grace, and there is a big difference between the two.

Mercy is when you beat on Liz's door repeatedly asking for money and she eventually gives you a loan. Grace is when you repeatedly smash a brick through her car windows—and she bakes you a cake. [I want to emphasize that this is only an illustration; don't try it at home!] Grace is surprising, unexpected, remarkable kindness. It's not about justice. It is not something deserved, or won by effort, but a stunning gift. Paul experienced the grace of God in being forgiven, even as chief persecutor, and he sensed a calling to share that surprising grace of Christ not only with fellow Jews, but also with all of the Gentiles—the non-Jewish world.

Faithful Jews normally viewed Gentiles as outsiders; they were excluded. As our reading from Ephesians puts it, Gentiles were without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the promises given in the biblical covenants, having no hope and without God in the world. They were seen as idolaters, clueless sinners, people who were not part of God's family of faith.

Forgiven by the one he had persecuted, Paul believed that he was now called to bring the message of God's astonishing grace to Gentiles. But not many of his fellow Christians were so keen on the idea. They weren't keen because the first followers of Jesus continued to observe the requirements of Jewish law. And they doubted that Gentiles would want to do so or could do so. Inclusion came at a price, but Paul wanted to make it free.

Today we take for granted that anyone can become a Christian simply by choosing to put their trust in Christ and being baptized. But in the earliest history of the church it wasn't so simple. All of the very first Christians were Jewish, and they felt no compulsion to stop following the Torah's commands. Like the psalmists, they rejoiced in the Law; what was new was their belief that Jesus was their promised Messiah.



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As far as we know, Peter, James, John and the other disciples of Jesus kept the kosher laws (so no bacon sandwiches or pork pies), basically observed the Sabbath and festival days, and probably even continued to offer sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. Otherwise, the high priest and other leaders at the Temple would not have allowed them to continue to worship there. But the book of Acts indicates that Christians kept praying in the Temple for many years.

In fact the biggest theological issue for the church in the first century was a question of inclusion. What did Gentiles have to do to get in? Did non-Jews have to become Jews in order to be Christians? And specifically, did Gentile men have to be circumcised? Many conservative Jewish Christians thought so. The only Bible that they had (more or less what we know as the Old Testament) commanded it. The Bible said it, they believed it, and that settled it.

Paul disagreed. He continued to believe that the Scriptures were given by God and authoritative, but emphasizing grace and the cross as God's way of demonstrating his love for all, he taught that circumcision was no longer a requirement for Gentiles to be part of the family. Christ's obedience and his defeat of sin and death on the cross meant that all people could be freely included without having to meet any other entry requirement than faith. No strings attached. Remarkable, breathtaking, amazing grace. That was good news for people who were attracted to the monotheism of Judaism but who were put off by some of its distinctive rules. It was especially good news for non-Jewish men who were not exactly thrilled at the prospect of adult circumcision.

But that message made Paul public enemy number one for traditionalists. People whose ancestors had given their lives 200 years before in the Maccabean revolt. Their ancestors had died in order to preserve the distinctives of Israel's religion, when Antiochus Epiphanes IV had tried to stamp it out in an aggressive programme of Hellenization. And now Paul was coming along, saying that you could be a child of Abraham without keeping the Torah practices that marked you out as a Jew. That was scandalous grace.

In a stroke, Paul lost his friends among the Pharisees. And many conservative members of his new Christian family of faith viewed him with deep suspicion; surely Paul was going too far. Some wags twisted his message. They falsely accused him of teaching that since God's grace abounded in forgiving sins so freely, that meant that people should sin all the more so that grace would superabound. By removing some requirements of Torah, Paul seemed to be saying that it didn't matter how Christians lived their lives.

But Paul and those who followed him pressed on with his dangerous, inclusive gospel. His life was threatened repeatedly. Five times he was punished with thirty-nine lashes for daring to preach his message. But the man who had once resorted to violence was no longer a sectarian. Paul was an inspirational leader because he believed in the inclusive love of God that should compel us to love others. His letters show us that when he pondered the meaning of the cross, he saw love in action. Love that did not respond to violence with further violence, but absorbed all the evil that men inflicted on Christ without him returning it in kind.

The One who knew no sin, took on our sins and gave himself to rescue us from bondage and alienation. As Paul puts it in Romans, 'God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. Like Jesus, Paul saw the law summed up in the great text from Lev 19.18: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. The great Pauline passages that we hear read at most funerals and weddings remind us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, and love is the greatest and most enduring gift.

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Eventually, about fifteen years after Paul became a Christian, the apostles in Jerusalem held a crucial meeting to settle the issue of inclusion. By the year 50 AD, Peter and some other traditionalists had come to see that Gentiles like Cornelius were receiving God's spirit when they trusted Christ without their having been circumcised. So were circumcision and other Torah practices really necessary? Acts 15 indicates that there was a major debate, and Luke doesn't paper over the differences. The future of Gentiles—that's most if not all of us in this chapel—hung in the balance. It was a close run thing. The leadership took another look at the scriptures and decided that Paul and Peter were right. The Christian faith moved in a more inclusive direction.

Paul's gospel was an inclusive message, because the apostle was convinced that Jesus had given his life not just for the righteous, but for sinners. And that included everybody. It is not a question of having enough A-levels, passing the right exams, impressing in an interview or even living a perfect life. We all qualify because one way or another we fail and fall short. The grace of God is there for everyone in Christ, calling us back to his family no matter how far we may have wandered into the far country.

The Jerusalem Council did not stop opposition to Paul. Some seven years later, he sent his great letter to the Christians in Rome. He told them that he hoped to visit there before long. He wanted Rome to become a base for him so that he could take his message of freedom in Christ to the people of Spain. But first he needed to set sail for Jerusalem from Corinth, taking with him a collection of money from the churches he had founded. And he asked the Romans to pray for him. He needed their prayers because he knew that his life would, once again, be in danger. There were plenty of people in Jerusalem who still saw him as an apostate, a heretic who should be put to death.

The interesting thing is that Paul did not really have to go back to Jerusalem. Someone else could have taken the money. It was for the poor there. But that collection was symbolic. It represented his concern that the Gentiles he had led to faith were one family with their Jewish brothers and sisters. Maintaining unity mattered to Paul, because his vision was inclusive. He was not a sectarian, and had no desire at all to create separate churches based on the cult of his personality. For Paul, Christ died and rose from the dead to unite everyone with God and with each other. In his letter to the Galatians he gave us those memorable words that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

That commitment to unity eventually cost Paul his life. When he arrived in Jerusalem he was arrested at the Temple on false charges and imprisoned for two years in Caesarea Maritima, before being shipped off to face the emperor in Rome. Over the course of his final years he wrote several letters from prison; we have seven attributed to him. For those who have ears to hear, they are letters full of grace, love and appeals to unity.

Whether Ephesians was actually written by Paul or is a summary of his theology written by an admirer after his death (scholars disagree), it brilliantly epitomizes the apostle's vision for inclusion. As our reading puts it, now in Christ those who were at one time far off have been brought near by the death of Jesus. He is our peace—our shalom, who has made Jew and Gentile one people, breaking down the barrier that divided the two groups in order to create a new united humanity in himself and to reconcile both groups to God in one body by the cross. The message of Jesus was really about peace for all, and through him both Jews and Gentiles have access to the God from whom they were once estranged and separated by lives that ignored or rejected him.

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So now, Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with God's people. We belong to his household and are growing collectively into a living, holy temple in which God dwells by his Spirit.

No matter how people may mistranslate Paul's Greek, ignore the context of his work or twist his writings, let us make no mistake about this: Paul was an inclusive leader. And humanly speaking, you and I are here tonight because of that.