**Galatians 1:1-10**

**What makes a church a church?**

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That is a fundamental question that has been addressed throughout history, of course - but never more so than in our day when the Church of England is trying to develop new and creative ways of engaging people with the Gospel but without losing the essence, the heart, of what it means to be Church.

At St. Andrew’s, it is a question we are constantly grappling with. We have a rich tradition here, going back hundreds of years, and we want to remain faithful to that. But we are also aware that there are literally thousands of people in our town who remain untouched by the Gospel and do not enjoy a relationship with Jesus. And the harsh reality that we are constantly seeking to address is that the way we do church, which is so precious for so many of us, can sometimes be a barrier to others coming to faith and so we need to find new ways of presenting the Gospel into 21st-century Britain.

That’s not true only of St. Andrew’s, of course: it’s a challenge to each and every church. All churches are – or should be – seeking to find ways of being culturally useful in their contemporary context. And that is why Bishops throughout the country are absolutely adamant that each church should have a Mission Action Plan to guide the thinking of how to do mission and ministry in the local context.

So, what is that starting to look like at St. Andrew’s as we continue to work out our Mission Action Plan together?

Well, as I mentioned in the paper on vestments that I included in the pewsheet this morning, the days are over of being able to categorise Anglican churches as Low Church, Central, or Anglo-Catholic. There is now so much crossover between Anglican traditions that there is a deep sharing of spiritual heritage between the three and there is a greater interaction of spirituality between the three traditions. Anglo-Catholic churches are committed to good preaching and Bible Studies. Evangelical churches use a range of vestments and, often, incense and other symbols. Central churches continue to draw equally from both traditions. All three traditions will draw on the same pool of hymns and Christian music. Taize chants are as likely to be heard in an evangelical church as in an Anglo-Catholic church. ‘Shine Jesus Shine’ is just as likely to be sung in an Anglo-Catholic church as an evangelical church. And that’s a situation that was unthinkable in the 1980s and even into the 1990s.

Barriers of tradition are breaking down and there is an increasing sense of sharing spiritual resources.

So, as I say in my paper in the pewsheet, it is far more useful to think of Church of England churches in its historic definition of being a Reformed Catholic denomination. The word ‘Reformed’ means that we are committed to excellence in terms of Bible Study, preaching and the study of God’s Word. The word ‘Catholic’ means that we are committed to upholding our ancient heritage and to celebrate the ritualism and symbolism and liturgy that underpins our worship life together.

Now, every church will prioritise these two poles slightly differently: some will be more ‘Reformed’ and less ‘Catholic’ whilst others will be more ‘Catholic’ and less ‘Reformed’. But our task here at St. Andrew’s is to do what we can to hold these two ideas together and be truly ‘Reformed’ and truly ‘Catholic’ if we are to fulfil our Mission Action Plan as an Anglican congregation.

So, as a result, we are seeking to build a strong ‘Reformed ministry’ through our Bible Study courses, our preaching, our Children’s and Youth discipling programs, our social media ‘Thoughts for the Day’ on Facebook and so on…

And we are also trying to build a strong ‘Catholic ministry’ through our broad use of liturgy and the variety of services we offer, through the breadth of vestments that we will be introducing, through our use of both wafers and bread at different Holy Communion services, through our hymnody and the anthems that the choir sing, through extending the Communion Table to all baptized believers and so on…

If we are to be “Church at the heart of Enfield”, we must be both truly ‘Reformed’ and truly ‘Catholic’.

Truly Anglican.

But as we seek to develop contemporary forms of mission within the historical tradition of St. Andrew’s, we must constantly be asking ourselves, “What are the non-negotiables?” “What must we never lose if we want to remain faithful to Christ?”

That is a question that is asked in every generation, of course, and the answers have often been bound to the cultural context rather than any good theological reasoning.

So, for example, in the Middle Ages, it was argued that all worship services should be conducted in Latin and not in the native tongue: a non-negotiable. In the 17th-century, it was argued that all worship services should follow the Book of Common Prayer: a non-negotiable. Until the late-20th-century, it was argued that only men could be priests: a non-negotiable. Today, the argument is often around whether we should have gay marriage in church or whether gay clergy should be allowed to be married: for many this is a non-negotiable.

But cultures shift, and so theology and church practice adapts to that.

But it can’t be true that the church should be entirely dictated to by shifts in culture: surely there are some non-negotiables; things that we need to hold fast to…

The question is: what are those things? What are the non-negotiables for us as Christians?

Today, we had a reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. It is a short letter, written to the church in Galatia about 25 years after the death of Christ and to understand it, we need a bit of historical background…

The first Christians were, of course, Jews. And after they had accepted Christ, they continued with their Jewish practices because they understood Christianity to be an expression of Jewish faith. So the first Christians circumcised their children, kept the Passover, worshipped at the Temple and celebrated the Jewish Festivals.

However, before long, Gentiles were coming to faith too and the Jewish believers told them that, to be true Christians, they had to fully practice the Jewish rituals. So the Jewish Christians wanted the Gentile converts to be circumcised and for them the live under the Jewish religious laws.

For the first Jewish Christians, the ancient Jewish rituals were non-negotiable: to be a Christian meant to participate in these rituals.

But Paul disagreed with this. He said that it was fine for Jewish Christians to practice Jewish rituals but that Gentile Christians shouldn’t be forced to adopt these because they were not essential to salvation. To cut a long story short, a Council was held in Jerusalem, and you can read about that in Acts 15, and it was decided that Paul was correct: Jewish Christians should continue with their Jewish traditions and Gentile Christians should develop their own traditions. Both were equally valid.

And, actually, that is the approach I am taking to developing mission-strategy here at St. Andrew’s, as I think you have worked out by now. Those who want a traditional service have plenty of weekly opportunities to enjoy that: through our Eucharists and our Morning and Evening midweek prayer. And those who want something more contemporary are having increasing opportunity to enjoy that too, though Parade Service and, soon, through Messy Church.

So the Council at Jerusalem made their decision that there was space for both Jewish ritualism and contemporary Gentile practice within the church.

But there were still some people who disagreed with it because they didn’t want anything to change and they were intent on stirring up trouble. So they went to Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, into the region called Galatia, and they started spreading gossip about Paul about how he wasn’t really called of God and how he had no real authority and how his teaching was inappropriate and wrong and how Gentile Christians should, after all, be made to accept Jewish ritualism.

And so Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians to explain his position and convince them that adherence to ritualism was not essential as an expression of Christian life and worship.

And it’s a good letter for us to consider at this stage in the life of St. Andrew’s because it helps us understand better what is essential and what is not with regard to Christian life and practice.

Paul’s concern, and our concern as a mission-shaped church, is that people should hear the genuine gospel of Jesus Christ.

But what is the Gospel? It’s a word we use in every act of worship, perhaps without thinking what it really means. It’s meaning is ‘Good News’: the Gospel, by definition, is ‘Good News’. And the Good News is that Jesus died for our sins and, as a result, we have received forgiveness from God and we are now reconciled to God for all eternity. And since we have received forgiveness and love and reconciliation from God, so we are to live lives of forgiveness and love and reconciliation towards others. To live the Gospel means to love others and do all we can to bring peace and reconciliation into the world. That is the Gospel.

It is a simple truth – it is a simple way of living. Paul knew that – and wanted to defend that truth at all costs.

If we want to be a church that is shaped by the Gospel, this is a truth that must be defended at all costs. We must not be like the Judaizers, who wanted to add layers of rules and rituals on top of the Gospel, creating a sort of Gospel Plus. Our task as a church is to nurture one another into the Gospel life where forgiveness and love and reconciliation are hallmarks.

We must not lay down for one another, or enquirers at St. Andrew’s, regulations about what service they should come to, how they should dress, how they should behave, what liturgies must be used, what creeds must be said, what rituals must be undertaken, what hymns or songs must be sung. All these things are matters of preference, not matters of faith.

It is a historical fact that the worldwide Church has always struggled to remain faithful to the simple Gospel and has constantly created a Gospel Plus. And it seems to me that the Plus-part has always been in relation to some moral or ethical issue of the day. When Emperor Constantine was converted, he endorsed a Gospel Plus adherence to the Roman Empire. In the period before the Enlightenment, during the days of Galileo, the Church endorsed a Gospel Plus adherence to the flat earth theory. In the 19th-century, the Christian Missionary Movement endorsed a Gospel Plus acceptance of the English language and customs. In the 20th-century, Christian Imperialism has endorsed a Gospel Plus acceptance of democracy. And in our day, what are the Plus elements? For some, as I said earlier, it is Gospel Plus accepting Gay Marriage. For others, it is Gospel Plus rejecting Gay Marriage. Or it may be Gospel Plus supporting Women Bishops or, conversely, Gospel Plus rejecting Women Bishops.

The temptation is always with us to have a Gospel Plus agenda and to judge the faith of others by their response to the Plus element. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul is absolutely convinced that there is no place for a Plus agenda in a Gospel-based faith. Of course, that’s not to say that we won’t have opinions on issues like the shape of the earth, the appropriateness of same-sex relationships, or the role of women in leadership or the ethics of genetic engineering and so on. But like Paul, we must be absolutely sure that we never elevate these issues to a Plus agenda that prevents people from responding to the Gospel. And it’s not an easy task – history has shown us that.

But I am absolutely convinced that this church in Enfield must be a place where people are free to pursue their agendas and feel safe to express their agendas without them ever becoming a Plus agenda for our Community itself. St. Andrew’s must be a church where we celebrate diversity of opinion whilst all holding unity over the simplicity of the Gospel itself. In verse 7, Paul wrote, “There are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ.” We must strive together for St. Andrew’s to be a non-confusing place, where we always proclaim a simple, straightforward Gospel and offer people the space and time to respond to that Gospel.

It’s all about love.

It’s all about grace.

It’s all about forgiveness.

It’s all about reconciliation.

Nothing more and nothing less.

As a mission-shaped church, we must be a Gospel-oriented church so that all who come through these doors will get a glimpse of God, a glimpse of eternity, and together, we will have our lives transformed by the Holy Spirit of God in whom we work out our salvation.

So, by all means, let’s have different opinions about what our priorities should be and express our preferences about how we would prefer things to be done. But we must humbly acknowledge that all these are opinions and personal preferences and not the Gospel itself.

The Gospel itself is very simple: it’s about the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross. And that can be expressed and celebrated in a church building or a school hall, by a man in robes or a woman not in robes, through ancient hymns or modern songs, through bread, through wafers, through Latin liturgy, or the in the language of the people, through an organ playing or a guitar playing. It really doesn’t matter…

…all of these are Gospel Plus matters, not the Gospel itself.

The Gospel is about the reconciling work of Jesus done on the cross, nothing more, nothing less.

And in our worship, in our various ways, and with our various preferences, we all join together as one united body to celebrate the Gospel here in 21st-century Enfield. And we are committed, as a Mission-Shaped Church, to share that Gospel loudly and clearly throughout our local community.