

TUESDAY COMMUNION

Hymn: 426 O God of earth and altar

Reading: Acts 15. 1-11

Prayers:

"St. Paul and St. Paul's - the challenge of faith"

At St. Paul's it must be becoming hard to find a member of the Cathedral Chapter. First, their Canon Chancellor resigned because he disagreed with the majority decision to remove the protestors. Then the Dean resigned because his decision to close the cathedral and then to reopen it had made him and the church look weak and vacillating.

I am glad that I'm minister in Buxton rather than at St. Paul's but I guess that if a group of anti Tesco protestors, for instance, were to camp on our church fore-court we would find different viewpoints within our church family. We would suddenly find ourselves thrust into a highly political situation with which we might have our own strong views but with which we were ill-prepared to cope as a church.

The early church did not have the glaring spotlight of the world's media upon it. Nevertheless, it increasingly faced an issue which was deeply dividing the church. I'm not sure which group ought to be described as the protestors. My guess is that at Jerusalem, which was still the heart of this new Jesus movement, there was a fundamental conservatism. The followers of Jesus were Jewish by birth and Jewish by culture.

Their males had been circumcised and they kept the law of Moses. They saw Jesus as their fellow Jew who had been born, lived and died within the Jewish tradition. They also believed that he had revealed to them a profound new way of understanding the law and its requirements and that his death and resurrection revealed the way God was giving new life to his Jewish people.

What they were hearing about the conversion of non Jews was deeply troubling to them. It wasn't so much that women and men were becoming disciples of Jesus. That was OK but, as they saw it, a fundamental requirement of being a disciple was that they should be Jews like themselves.

The Jesus movement was a Jewish movement for a Jewish people. The protestors in Luke's story are Peter and Paul. Paul argues with those who are saying: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." There's no meeting of minds.

At this point the church could just have split into two but Paul and those who have rejoiced to see the Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus are of a different mind.

Clearly, there's an issue here which needs to be sorted out.

The way they choose to do it is by going to Jerusalem and meeting with those who are the traditional leaders of the church, described by Luke as the “apostles and elders”.

It is Peter who speaks first and no doubt he remembers as we do how he went to the house of the Gentile Cornelius. Reflecting on that experience he now recognises that what is fundamental in our relationship to Christ is not circumcision or the law of Moses but faith!

Those Pharisees who have become Christians aren't wrong to value circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law for themselves. They are wrong when they see this fundamental to being a follower of Jesus.

What is truly fundamental is “faith” and the outworking of that faith in the life of the individual and the Christian community.....

This brings us back to St. Paul's. Jesus said more about money than any other single subject.

My impression is that right across the political spectrum there is a deep unhappiness about the way the wealth of the nation has been handled by some of our largest institutions. In too many of them there has been irresponsibility and handling money has become an excuse for personal greed with vast financial benefits even for those who have failed and dire consequences for our nation.

The protestors outside St. Paul's reflect that anger.

Faith asks the question, “In God's world, how is money to be used to create wealth and lasting benefit for the whole community?”

There are no simple answers but the protestors remind those with power and authority that it isn't a question that is going to go away!”

AMEN