



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 3rd July 2022
Readings: Isaiah 66, 10-14; Luke 10, 1-11, 16-20

Letters are such an important way to communicate. If we need to say something official, with a letter it cannot be forgotten. If it's something warm and affirming, with a letter it can be re-read, time and again, so that the encouragement or kindness lives on. And if it is some advice, or even an admonition, a careful letter can ensure it is said thoughtfully and accurately.

The New Testament contains several such letters, almost all of them redolent with guidance and good news. Several also chastise. Some are so dense in their theology that they require hard work to mine the depths of their meaning. But I sense that all are intended, in one of St Paul's frequent phrases, to 'build up' the church – never to belittle it or knock it back – but to build it up for its faith and following, its life and work. Written a couple of thousand years ago, often they were to specific churches, in identifiable circumstances. Their writers try to address the readers' needs, their hopes, and their fears – to relate the Christian faith to their lived reality, so that it is not just esoteric theory but something of a blueprint for a fulfilling, an abundant way of life.

This morning, time doesn't permit a detailed analysis of Paul's letter to the Galatians, but suffice it to say that it seems one of its foci is to counter so-called Judaizers – people who were troubling the Gentile churches of Galatia with their insistent demands that, to be a good Christian, one had first to become a good Jew - that circumcision and law-keeping were essential to salvation. By contrast, in these six chapters Paul is stressing the Christian understanding that the Church is first and foremost a community of those who trust that we are put right with God by faith in Christ alone.

Churches are obviously different today from two millennia ago, yet they live with some of the same challenges. The place of *faith in Jesus Christ* is often given a lower profile on churches' agenda than are the *good works* that, perhaps, are easier to get our heads round. So it is that the Epistles speak time and time again to *our* 'lived reality', too, rewarding insightful reading by offering us advice, rebuke, and something inspiring to cling to in the febrile and uncertain days through which we are living. This letter to the Galatians is no exception, brimming with ideas to inform and inspire for living as followers of Christ today. Indeed, it could be Paul's Letter to the Downing Place-ians. From just three of the verses we heard, I want to make four simple points, that I feel are as relevant now as they were to their initial readers in the highlands around Ankara, today's capital of Türkiye. Downing Place Church may not be burdened with members who are trying to make us into Jews, but in a world not over-focussed upon Christian discipleship there's stuff here a-plenty to encourage us in the lifestyle of Jesus' followers, and not least as we continue to work at, rather than take for granted, the union of Emmanuel and St Columba's into Downing Place Church.

Verse 1 opens by saying: *'My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.'* Who knows what our transgression might be? But given that none of us is perfect, there will inevitably be times when our fellowship is restricted or bruised by disagreement or disappointment. Paul's word urges 'restoration'. It's the same Greek word as Matthew uses for 'mending nets' (Matthew 4.21) ¹, and maybe that's a good image. Combined with the emphasis upon gentleness, this word about 'knitting together' and 'uniting completely' holds out for us the aspiration for the

¹ καταρτιζετε - from καταρτιζω, to knit together, unite completely

sort of church we'd be. You see, it's not about the naïve dream that we will never disagree, but rather the determination that, being pliable to the love-enabling Holy Spirit, we can be put right both with God and with each other – restored.

Then that first verse goes on to say, *'Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.'* Interestingly, whereas the first part of the verse is in the plural, Paul changes to the singular here. He is urging each of us to look carefully at our own example. This business of restoring those who've transgressed is not just about being merciful to others, but also being aware of our own capacity to be part of the problem. It may just be the ill-considered word here, or the intemperate reaction there, though sometimes it is worse. As the well-known children's talk has it, for every finger pointed at others, remember there are three pointing back at oneself. We can only be a fellowship of reconciliation if we each accept responsibility for playing our own part in both the confessing *and* the forgiving.

Then in verse 2, we read: *'Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.'* This linkage between bearing others' burdens and fulfilling the law of Christ is an important pointer to the true nature of Christian care and compassion. When Paul says 'bear' one another's burden, he uses the same verb that the writers of the Fourth Gospel use for Jesus' carrying of the cross. (John 19.17)² Might that help us understand that Christian charity is to be characterised by the radical service which Jesus offered on the cross – unconditionally, uncompromisingly, without limits? Moreover, in other New Testament uses of that verb, there is also a hint of 'bearing *with*', or 'tolerating'. Such is sometimes the challenge of caring for another. It's not always easy. The vocation, even when we do not *like*, is still to *love*. We shoulder one another's burdens in response to, even in imitation of Jesus' shouldering the cross, there bearing our burdens. And as we reflect upon the significant challenge that many of us find such costly caring to be, especially for those we do not like, it is helpful to note that Paul has started using the plural again. It is together, in concert, as a team that the church is called to care. We are not to leave it all to one person. Nor is any one of us to grasp the privilege of all the caring for ourselves. So it is that we are blessed at Downing Place Church with Elders and Pastoral Visitors, alongside less official telephone call makers and letter writers, who all play a key part in how we corporately bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law and following the example of Christ.

And finally, in verse 3, it says: *'For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.'* Paul's probable focus upon those Judaizers might have influenced this verse. Maybe he's cautioning us not to think that fulfilling Jewish law and custom is the beginning and the end of being a good Christian. If we think that's what makes us 'something', we are hoodwinked, deceived, taken in. 'If you think that being law abiding and kind makes you somebody, then think again', he is saying; 'you're still nobody'.

And yet – those blessed Christian words, 'and yet' - Paul tells us in countless places, we are not nobodies. We are all 'somebody' in Christ. He takes us just as we are and puts us right with God. And it is out of that redeemed and blessed state – that new creation - that we are inspired never to grow weary of doing right, working for the good of all, so that, in the name of Christ, none believes themselves to be a nobody, none feels they are 'a long way from home' but all are a child of God. To close, as did Paul to the Galatians, 'for those who follow this rule, peace be upon [you] and mercy'. (6.16) Amen

N. P. Uden

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² βασταζετε, from βασταζω, to bear, shoulder, bear with, tolerate