

**Aim: We honour our mother church by contending for the truth of the gospel**

## INTRO

The fifth commandment is “Honour your father and your mother.” Today is Mother’s Day, for many people a happy occasion when we show our appreciation to mums with gifts of flowers, chocolates and meals out. We shouldn’t need a sermon to remind us to do that. But for some it is a more difficult day, reminding us of loss, strained relationships. As parents and children grow older, some of us have had to face the time where mother (or father) no longer knew best, started to act strangely and make foolish decisions. Honouring our parents then became a more difficult task.

Mothering Sunday began as a medieval church tradition encouraging people to return to the church of their baptism for a feast in the middle of Lent - a kind of medieval “Back to Church Sunday”? But today we urgently need to have a difficult conversation about the strange behaviour of our Mother Church, the Church of England.

You may not want me to talk about this, but others have been asking me to do so at the morning service, and I believe that we need to do so, and I hope and pray that we may be able to hold together as a church family. You’ll receive a survey form at the end of this sermon; please complete and return to me. Some of you may question the concept of calling any church ‘Mother’ - is that biblical? I hope that Paul’s letter to the Galatians may help us. It has been associated with Mothering Sunday for many centuries. It is highly complex, and I am not going to attempt a detailed exposition, but it uses the language of motherhood in two ways. In this passage we see Paul full of pain, like a mother in childbirth, perplexed at what has happened to the churches he planted in Galatia, and pleading with them to recognise their true spiritual mother.

## POINT ONE: WHAT IS PERPLEXING PAUL?

Paul founded a cluster of churches in the Roman province of Galatia, now modern Turkey on his first missionary journey, described in Acts 13-14. He revisited them in Acts 16, and I am working on the assumption that the letter to the Galatians was written before the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15. What has happened that causes Paul so much pain, that he describes himself as “I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you?”

Paul sometimes calls himself a spiritual father, here and elsewhere he implies that he is their spiritual mother- (1 Thess 2.17: “but we were gentle among you, like a mother

caring for her little children”). We must allow Paul in his passion to use language flexibly as he seeks to illustrate his message.

What is threatening the relationship between the Galatians and their saviour? I am going to take you on a whistle-stop tour of Galatians: the references are in the study notes on the notice sheet.

1.6-I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all.

Who had caused this crisis?

2,4 some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.

They were telling the Gentile Galatians that they needed to keep the law about festivals and about circumcision as well as believing in Jesus Christ. But Paul warns them that this undermines faith in Christ.

3.10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”

**5.2** Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

These brothers had come from Jerusalem, so Paul reminds the Galatians that he too had been to Jerusalem, and the leaders (more senior than him) - Peter, John and James the brother of Jesus had not insisted on circumcision. But when Peter came to Antioch he publicly sided with those who did insist, and this failure of leadership also deeply perplexes Paul.

2.11 When Peter came to Antioch, **I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.** Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his **hypocrisy**, so that by their hypocrisy **even Barnabas was led astray**. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

Paul must have felt like he was the only one left who understood what was really happening, (like Luther at the Council of Worms, or Athanasius alone against the Arians -*contra mundum*) but he stood firm against Peter and James and Branabas his mentor, and eventually -at the Council of Jerusalem- (Acts 15) the Church recognised that Paul was right. But that lies ahead of this letter. Paul is perplexed because the gospel message that we are saved by Grace, the work of Christ alone, is being undermined by an insistence that we must also keep ritual requirements. We have to do a bit to save ourselves.

**POINT TWO: WHAT IS PAUL'S POINT?**

Paul is clear about the gospel. We are saved from sin, death and judgment when we repent of sin and put our faith in the person & work of Jesus Christ. Christ IS the gospel. If we add anything to Christ we destroy the gospel. Christ IS the gospel of grace, of freedom, in the gift and power of the Spirit. Christ PLUS Law is not the gospel of grace but is Works, and leads to Slavery, because we cannot keep the law, or earn our own salvation. The law is too weak to help us resist sin. Only The Spirit enables us to fight the flesh and avoid surrender to sin:

Gal 5.16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature.

But there is another way of destroying the gospel and that is to take away from Christ.

Christ MINUS LAW is not a gospel of Freedom, but a Licence to sin and plunge back into slavery. Paul argues passionately against that opposite error in 1 Corinthians, and against both in Romans. Jude sums it up in his letter: Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

The gospel is always under pressure from one side or the other, because we find holding fast to the gospel difficult, and are tempted to stray in one direction or other. The Church is like a drunk driver trying to stick in the middle of the road, but weaving from one side to the other.

Paul's passion for the gospel, his love for his spiritual children compels him to contend for the gospel, even if it means confronting St Peter himself, and the Apostles have passed this letter onto us, because this principle is vital. We must not surrender the gospel to error of any sort, but contend for the truth. Do you recognise this gospel truth for yourself- or are you still trusting in your own good works, and religious observance? That is wearisome slavery: accept that Christ has done it all, and find freedom! And this is what we now need to do in the Church of England, for the new prayers of blessing being commended by the Bishops are effectively saying: you don't need to repent of sin in order to be blessed by God. We don't think that sex outside marriage is sinful anymore. Brothers and sisters, this is a false gospel: not Christ PLUS LAW, but CHRIST MINUS LAW, Minus OBEDIENCE AND HOLINESS. And just as Paul contended against Peter, so

we must contend against the Bishops- and persuade them to change their minds.

**POINT THREE: WHAT IS PAUL'S PLEA?**

Paul appeals to the churches of Galatia to see what is really at stake. Those he opposes, the Circumcision Party, the GOSPEL AND LAW group, are saying that you need to keep the law to belong to Abraham's people, to be part of the true church. So Paul reworks a familiar story from the Law, the book of Genesis, to help them see who is the real church. v.26 the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.

Paul uses the word 'church' to mean a local gathering of Christians, and the whole people of God. He addresses this letter to the 'churches in Galatia'. We must beware of anachronism. They are not a diocese, or denomination. But they do have an organic connection, and a responsibility to one another. And if Paul does not use the words 'mother' and 'church' in the same sentence, he still wants us to love and honour one another. We have a duty of loving loyalty to our parents, and to the church where we worship

**He challenges to perceive: "WHO IS YOUR TRUE MOTHER?"**

I cannot fully unpack this complicated illustration or allegory, which Paul uses only here. So you want to be true sons of Abraham by being circumcised. You need to remember the story of Genesis 16 and 21 that Abraham had two sons, by two different mothers. Ishmael was born by normal means to Hagar, in a surrogate parenting pact. It was Sarah's and Abraham's own idea, because they did not trust God's promises to give them a son. But Isaac was born to Sarah because God kept his promise. And Paul says these two symbolise two different sorts of religion, two covenants, and I would say **two gospels**:- one based on human effort- like keeping the Law given on Mt Sinai, and one based on trusting God's gracious promise - like believing in Christ. Those who trust in the Law can be found in the present Jerusalem, Jews trusting in their efforts - and those in the church who are being misled. But those who trust in their keeping of the Law are slaves, not free. But Jerusalem above is our mother church. Paul is not saying that the real church awaits in heaven: it is here now, but has a spiritual origin and power.

Paul is warning the Galatians to beware of institutional authority: not all that comes from Jerusalem is from God. There is a false gospel at work there, but there is also a Jerusalem above. He calls those who trust the gospel the children of the Jerusalem above: **"She is our mother"**.

Paul is NOT calling the Galatians to split from the corrupt Church of Jerusalem and form a new pure Reformed Church of Jerusalem. Nor is he encouraging them to disengage from church life, to keep quiet and trust that they are part of the invisible church above. He pleads for them to contend for

the truth of the gospel where they are - in the churches in Galatia, warn those being deceived, and refute those in error.

### CALL TO CONTEND

Now you may disagree passionately with me about these issues, or think you do. I repeat what I have said: **everyone is welcome** at PPT under my leadership - whatever your sexual orientation or your theological view.

It is difficult to have proper conversations about this. I know- I have been part of the Synodical Shared Conversations since 2016 and it has been hugely frustrating. I have tried to offer courses to explain over the years - LLF last year, but not many have wanted to engage. We will be giving out a congregational survey at the end of this sermon. I want to know what you are thinking, and how we should respond. What are your questions? How could we engage with them?

You may think this is not my business. If the House of Bishops of the Church of England are agreed that these prayers are fine, not a departure from doctrine, why should we worry what the vicar says? But unlike Paul, I am not a lone voice. The crisis is real. The CEEC represents a substantial minority within the church of England, and it is supported by a substantial majority of the wider Anglican Communion. I am going to play you a short video from the Archbishop of Sudan, Justin Badi. The Province of South Sudan faces drought, civil war and poverty, and they treasure the peace-making efforts that the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury recently made on their behalf. The Church there is growing. They love the Anglican Communion, and regard the Church of England as their Mother Church, but Justin Badi is the Chairman of the Global South, representing 75% of the Anglican Communion, has made a priority of contending for the gospel -and he could not be clearer.

“It breaks our hearts to see our mother church, the church of England, departing from the historic faith. Despite several warnings issued by the Global south, they have not listened. They have decided to walk away from the historic biblical teachings. We no longer recognise the Church of England as the first historic province, and the Archbishop of Canterbury as the first among equals and the leader of the Anglican Communion unless there is a clear repentance and a return to the biblical faith and practice by the Church of England.”

The CEEC has produced many useful resources, and has just announced a campaign #compelledto resist” and I urge you to sign it if you feel able.

[ Paul quotes the treatment of Ishmael and Sarah - they persecuted.. drive out the slave girl - not a call to violence, but a warning that this issue cannot be ignored, that tolerance and diversity are not always virtues]

I am sorry to have raised such a difficult issue on Mothering Sunday, but if we care for our mother church, then we need to have this difficult conversation, when it is clear, to me at least, that she no longer knows best.

Paul is perplexed that the church was turning to a different gospel, Christ Plus Law, which was no gospel at all. The prayers being commended by the House of Bishops are diminishing the gospel into a Christ minus law, a licence for sin.

I have been in the Church of England all my life, and I am not about to walk away, but we must be clear where our loyalty lies - not with any human institution, but with Jesus Christ our Lord, and the gospel of faith in Christ alone, of freedom. “The Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.” So please engage, pray for me in the coming 10 days, as I and other clergy have meetings with all three bishops in the Diocese, and pray that they may think again.

Gal 5.1 Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Almighty God,  
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,  
that they may return to the way of righteousness:  
grant to all those who are admitted  
into the fellowship of Christ's religion,  
that they may reject those things  
that are contrary to their profession,  
and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same;  
through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

2767 words

### CONCLUSION

**Icebreaker:** What do you love and value about your home church?

We call God our father: who biblically should we call our spiritual mother? Who first planted and nurtured our faith? (Gal 4.19, 1 Thess 2.7, 11, 1Cor. 4:15 )

Look at Galatians 4.19- 5.1. This is one of the most complex parts of Paul's letters, and is not easy to understand! Fortunately we don't need to grasp all the details for this study.

How does Paul describe his relationship and anxiety for the Christians of Galatia (4.19)?

What threat to gospel freedom is Paul trying to counter? (Gal 1.7, 2.4, 3.10, 4.10, 5.2-4)

What support or help did Paul receive from the senior apostles in Jerusalem and church leaders in Antioch? (2.9-14).

The fact that Paul's letter to the Galatians is now part of the New Testament Canon is evidence that his argument was eventually accepted.

Look again at Gal 4.21-31. This is a dense theological argument or allegory on the story of the births of Ishmael to Hagar (Genesis 16) and Isaac to Sarah (Genesis 21). Paul sets up detailed set of parallels - 2 sons, 2 mothers, 2 covenants and 2 Jerusalems!

What are the essential differences between them?

How can we know that our 'mother church' is the Jerusalem above?

When deep disagreement comes to Galatia, how does Paul respond?

Does he tell the Galatians to find a better church, or contend for the gospel where they are?

What gospel issue is at stake in the present controversy in the Church of England?

How should we contend for the gospel? (Jude 1.3-4)

Pray for unity in the congregation, and for the apostolic gospel to be preserved in the Church of England.