

**A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at the Commissioning of Canon Margaret Carr as the Diocesan Director of Ordinands and at the recognition of the Diocesan Ordinands, Sunday February 18th 2007 in Christ Church Cathedral Newcastle.
Based on Galatians 4: 12-20.**

We are surrounded by State politics. Saint Paul was surrounded by church politics. The politics of faith were engulfing the churches in Galatia. Saint Paul knew how critical the outcome of these politics was to be.

Saint Paul whom we most know as the church's first great theologian emerges through this letter to the churches in Galatia as both an energetic advocate of a radically inclusive understanding of the Gospel, as a tactician, as a politician and as a devoted, passionate pastor.

The letter to the Galatians has been aptly subtitled by one commentator 'the politics of faith'.¹

We hear this passage of the struggles to comprehend the inclusiveness of the teaching of Jesus in the lives of newly established churches at the time that the Primates of the Anglican Communion are meeting. This meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion that is set to determine the parameters of inclusiveness of the gospel in a variety of cultures is a theological collision between different cultures and different interpretations of Holy Scripture.

Just as Saint Paul acted as a radical inclusive in the first great church conference, the Council of Jerusalem, and encountered heated debate and opposing views, so the Anglican Primates meeting at Dar es Salaam is facing differing understandings that challenge cultural contexts and views of interpretation of Scripture.

This meeting of the Primates will be yet another version of the politics of faith. We cannot get away from politics. Politics is basic to our lives for politics is about the management of organizations. Any group will have a version of politics. Politics in this sense is simply a neutral, descriptive term. It is not a pejorative indictment as we sometimes use the term.

Of course, the naïve lament that there should ever be argument within the church. But the wideness of God's mercy is at times misunderstood by the faithful who may want to domesticate God to their manageable expectations.

As that marvelous hymn of Fr. Faber has it

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own.

Narrowing the understanding of Jesus was the continuing issue for Saint Paul –the reduction of Christian faith to a version of Judaism. It was Paul who appreciated the radical departure that Jesus was from Judaism's expectations.

Judaism was based on a system of rights and deserts –the Law. Paul understood that such a system could not deliver the intimacy of relationship with God that characterized the life and teaching of Jesus.

¹ See PHEME PERKINS. 2001. Abraham's Divided Children –Galatians and the Politics of Faith. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.

Now we hope that those training to be priests for this church will be as passionate in their pursuit of theology as was Saint Paul. Indeed, we hope that they will be as radical in their understanding of the Gospel as was Saint Paul who prevented a revisionist gospel from the Jerusalem church controlling the church.

We must be careful that our awareness of the hostility towards the gospel (and indifference is latent hostility) does not spook us into wanting to be prescriptive about the gospel. There is within the teaching and social practice of Jesus shocks and surprises that warn against prescription. The God of surprises had clearly auditioned in Jesus.

Anyone or any church that wants totally neat theology without the cut and thrust of the politics of faith has not recognized the inherent questioning nature of the teaching of Jesus. The teaching of Jesus is subversive and produces fall-out.

The natural exclusions that once were socially acceptable are utterly unacceptable. The indifference to social issues is no longer tolerable. The disadvantaging of some to prosper others is indicted. Given the radical thrust of Jesus' teaching it is inevitable that there will be turbulence.

The quiet life is not church life, even if there is romanticism about English villages and vicars. Although we ought to have learnt from the Vicar of Dibley that politics even at the level of the parish council is inevitable, for social if not theological reasons!

What is fascinating about the extract from the letter to the Galatians that formed tonight's second lesson is Saint Paul's pastoral empathy for these churches. These churches were being raided by theological conservatives.

They were questioning the content of the gospel that Saint Paul had offered in his preaching. The issue is the effect of what Jesus has achieved and the universalism that Jesus has both signaled and introduced.

In his attempt to dissuade the Galatians from theological infections, Saint Paul employs a range of strategies. He argues as a philosopher. He rages in his rhetoric. He thinks of himself as one giving birth to the Galatian churches. In all his approaches there is a passionate pastoral heart that wants only what is theologically true for these churches.

Put yourself in my place, my friends, I beg you, as I put myself in yours. (v12)

You are my own children, and I am in labour with you all over again until you come to the form of Christ. How I wish I could be with you now, for then I could modify my tone; as it is, I am at my wits' end about you. (vv.19 & 20)

It is clear from the text as to the deep and abiding empathy that Saint Paul had for these churches. He loves them. He agonizes over them. He longs to be in their company but he is prevented from permanent residency with them because of his apostolic ministry –the very ministry which birthed them.

His ardent commitment to the Galatians causes him to be fairly Australian in his use of language and to name the theological spade as a particular theological shovel!!

He speaks of flatterers who are seducing the Galatians; 'bewitching' is Saint Paul's word.

The crisis engulfing the Galatian churches has distinct similarities with our own times. There are today's theological flatterers who promise economic prosperity as a direct consequence of

believing. There are today's conservatives whose revisionism of the gospel is a species of Jewish moralism.

There are still those whose understanding of the Christian Faith reduces the extent and nature of the new creation that the Raised Christ has effected. Such thinking suggests that the first (old) creation still holds sway with Jesus offering just a form of insulation to withstand its influence rather than Jesus having inaugurated an entirely new set of relationships and possibilities for humankind – a genuine real new creation.

The theological disputes are still with us and they have fallouts that deeply affect people's lives. There is one imperative that I want to hold very high within the Diocese –that those being trained for the priesthood must be theologically literate and articulate.

Not only is priesthood a matter of thinking theologically and living publicly theologically, but it is also a matter of having a pastoral empathy that has at the heart a deep desire that the church be mature.

In order for the church to reach (in that ringing phrase in the letter to the Ephesians) 'the stature of the fullness of Christ'², the leadership of the church must be mature – theologically and pastorally as well as politically astute, if we imitate Saint Paul. There are still the politics of faith –they swirl around us day by day.

This Diocese has embarked on a new formation process for its ordinands. This new process places the ordinands in several communities that will be interactively enriching and stretching. All this is to achieve the kind of maturity that leaders in a missional church will require if they are to provide real leadership from the front.

You will study your theology in a public university setting. You will undertake this alongside students of wide-ranging backgrounds and interests who will hopefully stimulate your thinking, question you, and provide a robust environment for your learning. You will be out in the intellectual marketplace, just as Saint Paul was centuries ago, as we hear from this letter to the Galatians.

Your second community will be this Cathedral with its daily round of worship. Your participation here in the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer and the Eucharist will shape you in your responsiveness to God. Anglicanism is a liturgical experience in which we are transformed through worship into imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I cannot overemphasize the significance of this liturgical community. The drop-out track of failed ordinands and priests is a trajectory from under-developed liturgical life.

Your third community is the priestly formation programme that has the exotic name of 'The Fifth Stream'. This is not an exercise in developing an alternative version of the four gospels, but rather an intentional process of integrating theology with practice and immersing yourself in the Anglican Tradition.

Anglicanism is a process more than a product, and therefore immersion in the stream of active reflection is an absolute necessity.

² See Ephesians 4: 13.

Your fourth community is your house. You have to learn to live together and to model Christian community. Being a priest is about being a community-builder. You will not be ordained a priest just so that you can be paid to be a private Christian.

Your task if you are ordained will be to practise Christian community as a leader. So you need skills at this very public dimension.

Amongst these requisite skills will be hospitality. So hopefully you will learn the art of hospitality in this miniature setting and your learning can be transferred to wider settings.

Your fifth community is yet to be formed. This will be the church that with Mother Margaret's leadership you will develop in the Honeysuckle and adjacent developments. Like Saint Paul you will be planting a church. This notion has rattled some observers of the new formation programme. Yet given the nature of our secular society, church planting will have to become a high priority just as church maintenance has been in the past.

I hope that you can detect distinct resonances between your situation in formation and training and Saint Paul's in his apostolate to the Galatian churches.

It is Mother Margaret as the Diocesan Director of Ordinands who has a maieutic role, that is, she acts as a midwife to this whole process. I am grateful that we have within the diocese a priest with these necessary skills and with a passion to undertake this significant and formative ministry.

Believe me, I have thought long and hard about this theological formation for without good formation you will be disabled in your later ministry.

Our intention is allied to Saint Paul's in his relationship with the Galatian churches
I am in labour with you all over again until you come to the form of Christ.

You will need the form of Christ in order to deal with the inevitable politics of faith.