

Year C

Galatians 3:23-29

G.K. Chesterton in his book *What's Wrong with the World?* wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."¹

When a Christian re-locates to a new area, maybe because of a new job, or beginning studies at university, it is customary for the person to spend some time looking about for a church to worship in and maybe join. Usually the advice is to take your time and

¹ Chesterton, G.K. 2007 *What's Wrong with the World?* New York: Dover Publications p. 23

have a good look before making a decision and that's sound advice. But how do you choose a church? What criteria do you use? You know, most folks will gravitate to a church that seems to best serve their needs and in many cases the new church will be very similar to the one they have left. We tend to be intensely individualistic; how do *I* fit in. And we tend to gravitate to people like ourselves. There, we are comfortable and we are more likely to be happy, we think.

But, could it be that the Church has chosen you? Could it be that Jesus has chosen you? The choice doesn't lie with you so why

are you involved in making so many personal decisions regarding a supposed choice? People these days are fond of identifying with all sorts of categories and labels. I am a vegetarian. I am a feminist. I am a nationalist; whatever.... In Paul's day they would say: I am a Jew; I am a Gentile; I am a slave; I am a free person; I am a man; I am a woman and whilst all these categories remained none of them would define the Christian. For Paul no-one was a Jewish Christian, or a Gentile Christian, or a Christian slave or a Christian free-man or a

male Christian or a female Christian but all were Christians in the family of God.

Paul in this passage in Galatians is addressing these kinds of issues. The Jews were asking; “what best suits us”. How will we find our happiness in the newly emerging church? And the answer coming back to Paul was, by insisting on the Law for all, or the main parts of it at least for the Gentile converts, like circumcision. What harm could there be in that anyway? They were really asking the question; “How much like a Jew does a Gentile need to be in order to be

a Christian?” And the answer coming back was, ‘as much as possible!’ And then lying beneath all of that there was more than a feeling that Gentiles were never going to be quite right, never mind what they did to fit in.

Back to Chesterton: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”

So much anger; so much sadness and so much fear because people did not understand what it meant to be baptised into Jesus Christ. Categories differentiate and unsettle creating tensions which pull apart.

We all have distinctives that we enjoy and we like nothing better than grouping up with those who share our preferences. We place great importance on being in the right. This has caused great trouble in the Christian community through the generations and we see the early prototypes in a passage like Galatians 3. Why does the church have a history of fragmentation that results in multiple expressions of the Christian faith springing up all over the place? One of the reasons is that people believe they are in the right and that lot down the road have got it wrong. Now, it may be over minor doctrine

but that begs the question; ‘if it’s so minor why are you not still together?’

Is it more important to be ‘right’, or to be in a healthy, well-boundaried relationship in Christ? After all, have you chosen the church or has the church chosen you?

During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not, faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of

those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp.

When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension. Finally they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together. Francis Schaeffer, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility

and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred.²

It's getting to the point when everyone agrees that something has to be done is absolutely necessary. Until then all striving is futile.

The American devotional A.W. Tozer wrote:

“Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each

² Our Daily Bread, October 4, 1992

one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”³

Something has to be done; someone has to be looked to: Jesus Christ. If you are baptised into Christ, you belong to Christ and so you belong to one another in the family of God. Therefore all other

³ Tozer, A.W. 2009 The Pursuit of God Indianapolis: Eremetical Press p. 90

distinctions are at best secondary and at worst absurd.

Tradition claims that Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built over the cave in which Christ is said to have been buried. In July 2002 the church became the scene of ugly fighting between the monks who run it. The conflict began when a Coptic monk sitting on the rooftop decided to move his chair into the shade. This took him into the part of the rooftop courtyard looked after by the Ethiopian monks.

It turns out that the Ethiopian and Coptic monks have been arguing over the rooftop of

the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for centuries. The rooftop had been controlled by the Ethiopians, but they lost control to the Copts when hit by a disease epidemic in the 19th century. Then in 1970 the Ethiopians regained control when the Coptic monks were absent for a short period. They have been squatting there ever since, with at least one Ethiopian monk always remaining on the roof to assert their rights. In response a Coptic monk has been living on the roof also, to maintain the claim of the Copts.

And so we get to a Monday in July 2002, when the Coptic monk moves his chair into

the shade. Harsh words led to pushes, then shoves, until an all our brawl is going, including the throwing of chairs and iron bars. At the end of the fight 11 of the monks were injured, including one monk unconscious in hospital and another with a broken arm.⁴

May we not so distort the good news of Jesus Christ that a suffering world looks on us with despair and disgust. We are no longer imprisoned. We are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us live in the light of that. Amen.

⁴ Reuters, Monday July 29, 2002

