

July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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**HYMNS:**    **32**    **“Meet and right it is to sing”**  
              **686**    **“Jesus, Lord, we look to thee”**  
              **585**    **“God, whose love is all around us”**  
              **620**    **“Thou God of truth and love”**

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**READINGS:** **Galatians 6:1-10**  
                  **Luke 10:1- 16**

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### ***“GOD IS NOT MOCKED”***

It is a mere 10 days since the Referendum but it has been a period of unprecedented bewilderment and confusion in our country, a period of fevered and recriminatory actions within both major political parties. It is as if the Referendum was the key to opening a Pandora’s Box of attitudes and opinions which had been held in check just waiting for the opportunity to burst out. There has been an increase in hate crime but also an increase in people out on the streets expressing welcome for people from other countries.

But the country and the political parties have been fractured by what has happened. The please are now for calmness and a period of trying to bring the country back together again. Unusually for someone who does not enter the political fray, the Queen has called for a period of calm and reflection.

Our reading from Galatians is part of Paul’s advice to a Christian community which is at odds with itself instead of one united group working to bring about the Kingdom of God. The Christians in Galatia had split into groups and were busy criticising each other instead of working together for a common purpose. These divisions in the Christian community were not about theological issues primarily but arose from the various groups who were claiming a different status from others – there were Christians of Jewish origin and Gentile Christians, there were rich Christians and poorer ones and there were some who were Roman citizens and those who were not. These status attitude markers were causing serious problems in the Galatian Christian community. As always some people thought they were superior and looked down on others. Some were critical of others who did wrong and never thought of the possibility that they may well be in the same situation one day.

Paul is eager to get the Christians in Galatia to recognise where they were falling short of the life they had been called to in Christ. So he spelt it out.

First of all there were clearly some of the Galatian Christians who were critical, even judgemental, of those of their number who did wrong things. One gets the feeling that there was even some gloating .... and most definitely some assertion of righteous superiority. Paul reminds the Galatians that all who have set out to follow Jesus, all who have received the Spirit have not done so for their own personal benefit. No – they have been called to look after weaker brethren to guide others gently and never, never to display an arrogant attitude of righteous superiority.

In effect Paul is saying, 'if my neighbour sins today and I notice it, I need to remember that it may well be me tomorrow. It is my responsibility to help put things right and I must do it without arrogance.'

We know only too well that we display just those same attitudes as those early Christians in Galatia – in church communities where gossip is always one of the most corrosive influences, dividing people from each other and deflecting the community from its real purpose of being an example of God's love in action.

I dare say to you – our visitors, Kentucky Ambassadors of Music as you are together in an intense community travelling together for the ten days of your European tour – I'm sure there is always the temptation to criticise those who make life difficult instead of trying to nurture them gently. Paul, in this passage has a word for you, too.

Clearly, Paul is aware that in the Galatian community there are people thinking of themselves as 'above others.' He is saying to them, 'if you think you are someone extra special, someone above the common run of humanity, able to look down on others from a great height – then think again, think again. The very fact that anyone can have such an attitude is evidence that they are not above others – but the very reverse – they are deceiving themselves.

What does the popular prayer say, 'if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and there is no truth in us.' Most of us are pretty good at deceiving ourselves and telling ourselves what we want to hear about ourselves and what we hope others will believe about us.

One of the common refrains these days after the Referendum is that both sides of the argument indulged in a campaign of deception and undoubtedly there is truth in that. It is also becoming clearer that there was also a lot of deception going on in the minds of the leading individuals and within the campaigns. But before we are too critical of this deception and try to wash away our own responsibility, let us remember that many of us were only too ready to be deceived because we had come to the debates with attitude and baggage. Now is the time of reckoning on all sides.

We all deceive ourselves in so many ways – for our own comfort, because we do not want to change or because we think that our welfare and success can only be achieved at the expense of others. Some of these attitudes which linger in our deepest being are just too painful for us to bring to the surface and acknowledge. But Paul is clear we may be able to deceive ourselves but we cannot deceive God – God is not mocked. He knows us in the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds.

We may be able to fool our fellow human beings but we cannot fool God. This does not mean that God will take vengeance on those who think and act wrongly, who pretend that they can do what they like and get away with it. Rather, it means that oddly our behaviour functions like farming. God in creation has decreed that if a farmer sows barley, barley will be what comes up but that if he sows nettles – well then nettles will come up. That is the way the world is – the way God's creation works. If in our words and actions, or in our failure to speak out, we allow hatred of

different groups to grow, we should not be surprised when our society fractures and life becomes more difficult, more insecure for all of us. What we sow, we shall reap.

One thing that was clear in the words and actions of Jesus and of Paul, and the other apostles, was that God created all people equal – male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free – all equally created in God's image, all equally loved and valued. That is the Kingdom value that we are all called to live out in our daily lives. It is a tough task – we need to work as a team if we are to have any chance of coming close to our aim.

Yesterday was the opening day of the Methodist Conference in Westminster Central Hall. The newly –inducted Vice President, Rachel Lampard used the word of the prophet Amos at the beginning of her address. She quoted a familiar passage but in a striking translation taken from a version of the Bible called, 'The Message.'

So here are the words which Amos offered as a serious reflection for the faithful on how we should use the gift of our own time together as a Christian community. Amos the prophet speaks in the voice of God.

“I can't stand your religious meetings  
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions  
I want nothing to do with your religious projects,  
your pretentious slogans and goals.  
I'm sick of your fundraising schemes  
Your public relations and your image-making.  
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego music.  
When was the last time you sang to me?  
Do you know what I want?  
I want justice – oceans of it.  
I want fairness – rivers of it.  
That's what I want. That's all I want.”

If we are the people who are going to work for those oceans of justice, if we are the people who are going to bring about rivers of fairness – we have to work as a harmonious and united team.

We have seen only too well in the Euro Football Tournament the difference between teams where there 11 stars all doing their own thing and those teams where the players are working together in harmony. We are all Welsh now!

In football the manager calls the players together for a team talk, to enthuse them to put aside their egos and work for team and country.

For Christians, our manager is God and he calls us together around a table, to remember the life and death of his Son, to take bread and wine and become one body – one body without distinction or division. He calls us together to bring about his Kingdom of justice, fairness, love and peace.

Let us not deceive ourselves; the challenge has never been greater. We are called to be light for a nation in danger of losing its way. May God grant us grace to work for a better nation and a better world. Amen.