

## **Sunday 20th January 2019 - Christ Centred - Galatians 2**

I wonder if you have seen the new BBC series ICONS? Looking at iconic personalities from 20th century and in each episode inviting viewers to vote for who was the most iconic leader, activist, entertainer, scientist, explorer, sports stars artists/writers.

It's thought provoking as you think about their achievements and what criteria you might choose to vote on... How would you choose between Winston Churchill or Nelson Mandela? Ghandi or Martin Luther King? Marie Curie or Alan Turing? Marilyn Monroe or Charlie Chaplin?

How do you assess someone's impact and lasting legacy? The series is thought provoking.

As we leave Galatians 1 and enter Galatians 2, Paul turns biographical and the letter reads like a who's who of the New Testament. As he writes Paul name drops Peter/Cephas, James, Titus and Barnabas among others... so I thought tonight as we start thinking about Galatians 2 we might have our mini-episode of ICONS. Icons of Galatians 2.

So, who will you vote for?

### **James:**

- 'A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'
- Early church leader
- First bishop of Jerusalem
- Stoned to death

### **Peter:**

- Fisherman called by Jesus
- Renamed 'Rock'
- Denied Jesus
- 3000 converted at first sermon
- Apostle to the circumcised

### **Titus:**

- Companion of Paul: 'partner and fellow worker'
- Gentile convert
- Trusted ambassador and administrator
- Served on Crete - perhaps becoming bishop there

### **Barnabas:**

- 'encourager'
- early member of Jerusalem church
- 'full of the Holy Spirit and of faith'
- Advocate for Saul/Paul after his conversion

### **Or the author himself, Paul:**

- dramatic conversion from persecutor to pioneer
- apostle to Gentiles
- prolific church planter and letter writer

- 'worst of sinners'
- fought the good fight

Who would you vote for? What qualities would stand out for you?

Titus or Barnabas?

Peter or Paul?

Or if you want to be a little more contemporary:

Tim Keller or John Stott?

Justin Welby or Rowan Williams?

Charles Wesley or Rend Collective?

Mother Teresa or Jackie Pullinger?

Tim Sanderson or... let's stop there!

Of course that kind of thinking is a nonsense. It's a symptom of our celebrity culture. But personality cults are nothing new! Roman Emperors depended upon them for their rule...

In the midst of so many early church celebrities, Paul writes:

***'As for those who were held in high esteem – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favouritism...'***

*Galatians 2.6*

But there are those who can try and make us take sides. Paul was combatting *false believers* (vs4) who were trying to sow discontent, trying to have their way, work to their agenda. Imagine that! Even in the early church, like any human institution, there were competing agendas, people briefing against one another.

The presenting issue here was about Jews and Gentiles. Specifically about Gentile believers (non-Jews) having to convert to Judaism or at least Jewish practices (circumcision, food/cleanliness laws) before they could become Christians.

There is a sense here that people are threatened by the freedom of the gospel from rules and regulations. Paul talks about those who *spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus... to make us slaves*.

The gospel preaches a freedom that many struggle with. For the Jews it threatens the ritual laws, the status quo. Religion often used as a source of control. Sometimes Christian gospel is viewed as a threat in some societies.

Bhutan is a country where the gospel is restricted. I recently read about one pastor who has arranged for CDs of Christian music, translated into the native language, to be distributed to all the taxi drivers who are playing it in their taxis as they drive customers around! I love the freedom and creativity of that.

Paul returns to the centrality of the gospel... he goes to Jerusalem *in response to a revelation* and to meet privately (without the false believers around presumably) with those esteemed as *pillars* (vs9).

He says: *'...I presented to them **the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles**. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.'* Galatians 2.2

He needed to go to check what was going on.

***When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel...*** Galatians 2.14

Paul confronts Peter, one of Jesus' inner circle, his confidant. Paul is not cowed by personality or celebrity.

Paul sees the need for realignment: *not acting in line* (vs14). The world constantly makes assumptions, and these assumptions must be weighed by the gospel. Tim Keller: 'Christian living is a continual realignment process...'

For Paul the gospel does not depend on other people, his beloved Titus, his respect for Barnabas, or his esteem for the first apostles Peter and James...

The gospel *is* person centred, but the centre of the gospel is **always** and **only** Jesus Christ. This is who realigns us: *'...I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...'* Galatians 2.20

This is Paul's conviction, that it's faith in Jesus Christ that saves us - what he calls justification here - that's what puts us right, and indeed will put all things right.

Not our works. Not what we do or don't eat, not what rules we keep or don't keep. Those don't save us. We cannot save ourselves.

The thing that brings me up short here, is that Paul is still speaking to Peter, the Rock/Jesus' confidant, here - if you look carefully, Paul is reporting what he said to Peter from the middle of verse 14 to the end of the chapter! Even Peter needed this reminder.

If this is what Peter needed to hear, how much more each one of us?

What are the ways in which we are tempted to put other things at the centre of our lives? Perhaps we overly depend on other people, rules, habits, traditions, attitudes, that can become the unthinking heart of our personal gospel, and so displace Jesus.

I remember my friend Rob, who said to me the reason he came to church was that it always reminded him that he wasn't the centre of the universe. When life had displaced Jesus, worship re-centred his life on Jesus.

Tonight Galatians 2 invites us to re-centre...

Tonight we are drawn deeper into our Christ-centred faith, we are invited to declare: ***'...I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...'***

Tonight we are drawn to his table, our lives re-centred here as we offer ourselves to be realigned by this truth:

***'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'***