

St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford
3rd Sunday after Trinity, 2019
Mthr Judith Brown

Galatians 6: 15

A verse from our New Testament reading: “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything: but a new creation is everything.”
+ in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Like many of you I spend quite a bit of my time walking around Oxford. These days I don't have to rush from College to Faculty, from lecture to supervision; and I have more time to look around me. We live in an extraordinarily beautiful city – with its great architecture, its open green spaces, its river and canal banks. Our own church stands at the junction of Beaumont St. and St. Giles. The great art historian, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, thought Beaumont Street one of the finest in Oxford; while St. Giles has been called one of the most beautiful streets in Europe. But as we walk around we also notice, particularly at this time of year, the extraordinary number and variety of people who visit Oxford. They may annoy, intimidate or enchant and delight us. But how we look on and respond to these children of God is material for another sermon! For today I have to admit that I also look around at advertisements: they are infinitely fascinating because they tell us so much about what we most desire, or at least what advertisers think we ought to desire, or what manufacturers would like us to think we not only want but need. So much are they a mirror into human hearts that I have often felt advertisements make good texts for sermons.

For some weeks now there has been an advertisement just across the road from the church, beckoning us into a cosmetics concession at the bottom floor of Debenhams. It is a concession of quality and I am sure utmost propriety. But its advertisement reads, “Get a new lipstick: get a new life.” There is something utterly banal but also tragic here. To think that we could alter our lives by buying a new lipstick: that a new life might depend on a new colour for part of our anatomy. This is not just a facet of western culture and its fears. As a teenager I remember when I returned to India being fascinated and appalled by seeing in chemists' shops a preparation called

“Afghan Snow” which was intended to lighten the complexions of those considered unfortunate enough to have been born with darker skins. (If you don’t believe me look it up on the internet as it is still available! These days it has gone more hi-tec as it has added a sunscreen.) Even those of us who are too supercilious to be tempted by such products and their promotion may well fall victim to persuasion that we really need the latest I-Phone, the newest type of trainers, a holiday in the most fashionable of new places and so forth. The list is unending.

The advertising industry as we know it is a modern phenomenon linked to mass literacy and to the development of different forms of mass media. But it plays into a fundamental human insecurity about who we are, where we stand in relation to other people, and ultimately our real worth and our capacity to love and be loved. Far removed from the world of an advertisement across the road, George Herbert, the great Anglican priest poet who lived over 400 years ago, recognised this in his poem, “The Pulley”. In it he pictures God pouring out on humanity a wealth of blessings, including physical strength, beauty, wisdom, honour and pleasure, until all that was left was Rest or Peace. He determines not to bestow that as well, lest man should love the gifts instead of the giver.

*Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlennesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tesse him to my breast.*

For Herbert as for other faithful followers of Christ, the issue of our identity, our worth, our loveliness, lies in our relationship with Christ. He is the manifestation of the outpouring and enveloping love of God for his human creation, the indwelling life which makes us whole and holy. We are the beloved and welcome guests at Love’s table – of which Herbert again wrote in his great poem, “Love bade me welcome.” It ends with words which deal a death blow to all the protestations of unworthiness and sinfulness of the potential guest:

*You must sit down says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.*

But what has this to do with today's reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians? Rather a lot. Paul was writing probably within 20 years of the death and resurrection of Christ to new gentile Christians in what we know as central Turkey – then the Roman province of Galatia, which had been settled with Celts from Gaul about 2 centuries earlier. It is an extraordinary blunt and forthright letter - as Paul saw that so much was at stake. The new gentile Christians were evidently being persuaded that they had to observe Jewish laws and rituals if they were to be genuine Christians. Paul writes, "I am astonished"; or again, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" He urges them to remember that they have been called to a new freedom in Christ, and even goes as far as to say that if they want to be justified by observance of the law then they are cutting themselves off from Christ and have fallen away from grace. What matters is not the observance of the law but faith working through love. He then continues with the marvellous passage about the contrast between the life lived according to the compulsions of the flesh and the life lived in accordance with the Holy Spirit whose fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the marks of the new creation. Only this matters. As if to reinforce the message he writes the final words with his own hand – "See what large letters I make when I am writing with my own hand!" He was to reiterate this vision of a new order of things, a new creation, in his second letter to the Corinthians.(ch.5; 17) "... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

For Paul, as for all godly Jews, creation was of the utmost importance – it was God's handiwork, God's delight and joy, and it testified to the hand and nature of the Creator. "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." in the words of Psalm 19, jubilantly set to music by Haydn in his oratorio, The Creation. But creation was marred by sin, by mankind's self-centredness rather than God-centredness. About this humanity had been able to do nothing. No scheme of sacrifices, no elaborate patterns of worship, no obedience to law had been able to deal with this and to heal the wound of profound longing and unease, and alienation, in the human heart. But almighty God in his unbounding love, did and does. Through the life and death and resurrection of Christ there is the hope and possibility of a new

creation – of humanity freed from its sinful compulsions, drawn back to its truest identity as the beloved children of God, free through grace to be what it is called to be. No wonder then for Paul the Galatians' apparent turning their back on this glorious hope and promise to rely on legal observances was a tragedy of profound proportions and significance.

Paul's words are for us too. We call ourselves people of faith, but we all face the temptation not to trust in the reality of grace, not to believe that God continues to make of us his new creation; in fact not to believe in Love. How much more normal it feels to try to reconstruct and refashion ourselves by spiritual hard work – after all, that's how our world works. How much easier to rely on polite moral conventions, on well-worn religious practices. But God calls us not to Religion but to Relationship – to a new relationship of trust in the reliability of his promises and to his work of grace in our lives. He calls us to trust that we are the raw material for his new creation and that he will go on forming us into what he calls us to be. In turn we are his body on earth; and the new creation involves our relationship with all humanity and with the natural and material world around us. It is an extraordinary contrast to the spurious promises of the advertisers about the life-transforming powers of new cosmetics or new possessions. We listen instead, and in hope, to the promise of Christ – that he has come to give us life – abundant life, beyond all our longings and imaginings. He calls us to his table, not just so that we may sit and eat with him, as Herbert wrote; but that he may form and nourish us with his own life – life broken and outpoured so that we might be made new.