

4<sup>th</sup> February 2018

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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**HYMNS:**     21     “Born in song!”  
              653    “O Christ, the Healer, we have come”  
              707    “Make me a channel of your peace”  
              571    “As you family, Lord, see us here”  
              881    “Give me the faith which can remove”

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**READINGS:** 1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
                  Mark 1:29-39

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### **“ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE”**

If I were to say to you that I try to be ‘all things to all people’ – you may well wonder what sort of person I am. Have I no principles, no guiding values as I relate to others? Am I just superficially agreeable to all and sundry with no great depth to my words and actions? You may think that I am not the sort of person to be trusted. This term, ‘being all things to all people’ is not used in a complimentary way in common parlance.

But wait a minute! Here we are in church where the ministers, lay workers, the pastoral leaders – indeed all of us are expected to be able to relate to all congregation members, all visitors and to people outside the church or on the margins. In this context are we not expected to be ‘all things to all people?’

In the passage we heard from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians he says of himself, ‘I have become all things to all people.’ So what did he mean? Let us recall that Paul was a tough guy. He had been a cruel persecutor of those who followed Jesus. He had had a dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. He felt compelled to share his experience of Jesus with others – he was ‘under obligation’ to do this. He became the first Christian missionary travelling around the towns and cities of the Mediterranean world preaching and teaching. There was nothing superficial, nothing wishy-washy about Paul. So what did he mean by saying, ‘I have become all things to all people?’

Paul’s most fundamental understanding of his role, of that obligation that had been laid upon him was that nothing should act as a stumbling block to his preaching the gospel of Jesus to all who would hear him.

Paul was a Jew. Like all Jewish men he had been circumcised. Many of Jesus’ earliest Jewish followers considered that those outside the Jewish faith – Gentiles – who wished to become followers of Jesus must first become circumcised, too. Paul was clear – to demand this of Gentiles was to put a stumbling block in their way to becoming followers of Jesus – part of the church. Time and again in his letters to the churches around the Mediterranean, Paul addresses this issue. Repeatedly he urges

his Jewish fellow-workers that circumcision was not a necessary qualification for becoming a follower of Jesus.

Yet Paul did not ride roughshod over his Jewish co-workers – he knew just how important their ages-long traditions were to them. Thus we heard in the passage from Paul's letter, "to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law (the Gentiles) I became as one outside the law."

It would have been counter-productive for Paul to live as an uncompromising Jew while he was with Gentile Christian communities because he would risk becoming like the 'judaizers' – those who tried to bind the Jewish law on Gentile Christians.

As many of you know I have spent 25 years of my life living and working in African contexts – in Zambia and in Botswana. Missionary Christianity and locally entrenched custom make for a very traditional context – especially for women. In appropriate contexts I could be quite critical of the traditional constraints laid upon women but I also knew that if I had gone to the pulpit or to a funeral with bare arms, a low neckline and short hemline – the 'noise' of those externals would have been so loud that people would not have heard my words. While not equating myself with Paul I did have to 'make myself a slave', in his words to the people I was with so that I might have a chance of winning them and influencing them by my preaching.

There is another aspect to the context of Paul and the Christians of Corinth. Paul was determined not to become a poodle of the richer members of the congregation who often sought to have undue influence. In every congregation, as many of us know only too well, there are those, who, by reason of their wealth or their power of speech try to direct the things that happen and seek to have a prevailing influence on the ministers. In this passage Paul was making it clear that such a thing should not happen and that he would never become a plaything of one group of people.

We, like Paul, in this sort of situation, need to ensure that we are equally available to all, equally challenging to all – 'being 'all things to all people.'

The great motivation underlying everything Paul did was to make Jesus and his gospel known to as many people as possible. It was an obligation laid upon him and woe to him if he did not proclaim it. Paul went to Athens. He knew he was up against it there. In Athens there were philosophers who spent most of their time in intellectual debate about the meaning of life and the conduct of life. In Athens the challenge was much greater than the Jew/Gentile challenge. How was he to find a contact point with these people who considered their ideas far superior to those of anyone else?

Paul was an observant person, a good quality in anyone seeking to be a witness to Jesus. Paul had observed, among all the various altars around Athens, an altar to an Unknown God – an insurance policy altar if you like, just in case they had missed out worshipping one god in the midst of so many.

That altar was Paul's point of contact – he brought the gospel of Jesus and the God of Jesus and made a link to the longing of the Athenians to understand the world and how they should live in it. Paul spoke to the people of Athens in a language they understood.

We are not always very good at speaking of our faith in any language. We live in a society where many people think they have everything sorted without recourse to the idea of God. Yet, so often, in the midst of life-crises people set up their own altar to an Unknown God – a plea for help in the midst of the storm. Do we have the language and the sensitivity to be the Paul to them in their hour of need?

Like the Jews of Paul's time it is easy for us to fall into a mind-set that assumes – if only unconsciously – that God favours church people over the 'unchurched', believers over non-believers, attenders over non-attenders. It can also happen that church people fall into a way of thinking where they are unaware that their own attitudes and practices may well – unhelpfully- make sure that the unchurched and the non-believing stay away. I hope that this is not true of Wesley's Chapel but so often churches give those outside or on the periphery of faith no reason to feel invited or welcome to become insiders.

You have probably heard this tale before and it may be apocryphal but it bears retelling. A Christian family were on holiday away from their usual haunts. On Sunday they wanted to attend church so they looked for the churches around and found one nearby but there was no indication outside the church of the times at which services were held. These were persistent Christians so they hung about outside the church on Sunday morning. Eventually the steward arrived to open up. They asked him about the service time and why there was no indication of it outside the church. "Well," said the steward. "if you did that you never know who might come in."

As I say, it may be an apocryphal story but I think it makes the point. Too easily our churches and our church groups become just like clubs – run for those already members whereas the church is the open organisation that exists primarily for those outside.

We, as believers, like Paul, have an obligation laid upon us to reach out to others so that in our lives as much as by our words, others can see what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In the early Church outsiders used to comment, 'see how these Christians love one another!' and it was part of the attractiveness of the faith. Do people say that of us?

Today we commission our Pastoral leaders – they, we might say, are our front line in showing, 'how Christians love one another.' We are all called to a ministry of pastoral care which means reaching out to people –inside the church and outside, to people who are not like us – and we are called to meet them on their own terms. What might this require of us in practical terms?

- It requires us to be deeply observant and good listeners

- It requires that we do not use 'churchy language' with people who have no background in it or high flown English with people for whom English is their second or third language.
- It requires that we keep quiet about our own experiences when people want to tell us about theirs.
- It requires that we do not stand in judgement on other peoples' lifestyles just because they are different from ours.

We, too are called to be 'all things to all people – not compromising our Christian values but meeting others where they are and always seeking points of contact.

Missionaries from Europe and America to Africa, Asia and the Pacific made many mistakes in the early days – not least the idea that they were 'taking God to other people' - until the missionaries learnt the local language, sat round the fires with old people and learnt their folklore and culture. That demanded patience and openness – in them as it does for us.

Paul said, 'I have become all things to all people'. Yet, by his own admission he did not succeed in doing that. He was run out of town, beaten by mobs, and thrown into jail by people with whom he did not exactly 'fully connect.' We will not always succeed in being all things to all people – though hopefully we will not get thrown into jail!

Yet we need to remember that one quarter of the New testament came from the hand of Paul, someone who lived a mission that mattered, treated everyone in a way that showed they mattered to him and to God and who sought to embody a still more excellent way of living his life in thankfulness to God.

I hope we can identify with these words which we shall sing in our final hymn this morning.

'I would the precious time redeem  
 And longer live for this alone  
 To spend and to be spent for them  
 Who have not yet my Saviour known  
 Fully on these my mission prove  
 And only breathe to breathe thy love.'    Amen