

Jenny was a baker's wife in Girvan when we moved there in 1988. Her shop was far enough away from Roodlands road where we lived to warrant a stop on the walk back from the end of Girvan beach to select a cake and have a bit of a chat.

Jenny was also the long serving superintendent of the Sunday school as we called them back then, an elder and a member of the weekly Bible study. So over time, we got to know Jenny a bit and one thing we discovered was that while she was all for Jesus she wasn't so welcoming if in Bible study we looked at a letter from Paul.

Oh not Paul again, she would say. I want to hear about Jesus. He's my Lord. So as we reflect on Paul, I am confident that Jenny is with us. I haven't thought about her for years, yet here today as I open up the letters of Paul I find her with me proffering suggestions for the way forward. Over the years I have found many who share at least part of Jenny's views. Paul changed the gospel message into a religious system, they say or he

changed the simple teachings of Jesus into a complicated philosophy.

Maybe Paul can seem a bit complicated, but all he speaks about is there in the stories and traditions of the early followers of Jesus as they try to work out what Jesus relation to God was all about and how it should inform their lives.

Like Jesus, we have absolutely no idea about what Paul looked like, but what we do have is some idea of what Paul was like as a person. Paul didn't know he was writing the Bible and his writing can be a little bit messy and convoluted. He seems to have been someone given to deep emotion and yes he is someone who turned the world upside down.

But the world he was living in was not organised as ours is today. There was nothing like the idea of universal human rights that we are familiar with.

So, when we think of the world Paul lived in it's important to remember it was very active commercially and very creative. It was world where languages and traditions mingled freely within the lives of the cities

and it was all held together rather unstably as Rowan Williams puts it by the authority of the Roman emperor and a particular crisp and vigorous version of the Greek language that was not like classical Greek.

Paul was a Roman citizen but also a Jew. He was part of a large group of Jewish traders, merchants, travellers and teachers called the diaspora. Those were the Jewish people dispersed around the Mediterranean in the centuries just before the Christian era.

Like the Roman world, the Jew's world was strictly defined too. You could be inside or outside or a citizen or a migrant. You could be Jew or Gentile, Pharisee or Sadducee, man or woman. So the background to all Paul writes in his letters is a world where it was very important to know exactly where you stood.

You might be surprised to discover that Paul actually lived in a world where nobody belonged to a religion. Yes, if you were Jewish you went to the synagogue. People though did religious things, but there were many gods and lords to worship. In Acts Paul says to the people of Athens. I see that you are very religious in Athens. But back then that would mean something

like I see you are very keen about keeping in with the gods

The point for us is that when we read Paul and sometimes struggle to understand his preaching, we need to remember he is not preaching a new religion. Paul is preaching a new order for the world. In other words what he is preaching is a new way of belonging with God and with one another based around the stories and traditions of the early Jesus followers.

He is working that out surrounded by many shrines to lots of gods and lords with festivals taking place throughout the year.

In summary what Paul is preaching is that believers have entered a new welcoming way of living. What he was asking those around him to do was to rebuild or alter a lot of what they had taken for granted in their social lives.

Paul's basic claim is summed up in Galatians 3:28. It is about having a welcoming attitude to all the believers. You are all one in Christ, he writes . You are all free in other words.

You have the power to shape your own lives.

But for Paul this doesn't mean we can just do what we want. It means we are free from feeling we have to make God happy before he welcomes us in. That's the big difference between what he preaches, and the world Paul lives in.

We don't need to soothe God's ego.

He's already pleased to see us no matter what.

And when it comes to working out what that freedom means, then it is all worked out around Jesus

Who is the image of God?

And we are welcomed into the community which Paul talks of as a body.

Paul is not the first to use the idea of a community as a body. But he means it in a particular way. It's not just about us playing our part in a group, it's about living with each other caring for each other.

Rowan Williams uses a particular illustration for what Paul means when it comes to the body.

'When Paul says the body is a community, it's not just a lecture on we're all in this together, Rowan Williams says. The difference is quite marked. A managing director might say to the cleaner 'Of course we couldn't get along without you,' but that would be different from him or her asking the cleaner for help or sympathy by saying something like 'I need your personal help, not your contracted role.' Or different from the cleaner saying to the managing director 'we know how hard your divorce hit your family and we all feel the strain and want you to know that we are thinking of you.' Paul is urging us to see the picture of the church as a body as something more mutual. It's not just everyone has their part to play it's more like Everyone has their gift to give and everyone needs everyone else's gifts. Anyone's problem or pain is everyone's problem.

And as we work like that, we model the image of God that Jesus shows us.

And in doing that we discover that the law of God is not just about a small part of the life and work we have on earth, but it is about the place where the spirit of

Jesus shapes human lives. The place where heaven and earth are bridged. The place where God's character can be visible on earth and that is in the community of believers living in the universal welcome of God every day all day.

And we are part of that community charged with showing that self-same image of God that Paul takes time to work out for his own place and time, here in our place and time.

Banchory 2020.

Peace be with you.

Amen