

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 16th May 2010

**Acts 15 - “Conflict of the Cross-roads: Jerusalem,
Little Shelford and the Mission of God”**

- Thanks for this great opportunity and out thanks for your years of support to us – links with Shelford go right back... (N.B. when I was taking a TNG session last year...more than half the group). You will need Bibles as we progress together... **(PP Slide 1)**

Introduction

- In 1797 Henry Martyn – aged just 16 came up from Cornwall to study at St John College, Cambridge. **(PP Slide 2)** After a shaky start to life here he settled in well and achieved academic excellence. He was converted during his time here and the impact of accepting the Lordship of Christ in his life, was to offer up every aspect of his life to God... Martyn had the prospect of a glittering career in Law, in the academy or in the church, but it was a meeting with the influential evangelical Anglican preacher Charles Simeon that God used to lead him to invest, what in the end was a very short life (he died at the age of 31), ... to invest his life in the work of God's mission in India and the Persian Near East...

- His life fascinates me... like many believers in that 'golden period' at the end of the 18th Century he burned with passion for God... he may not have been given longevity, but what he was given ... his talents, his abilities as a phenomenal linguist, his mind, his heart, his body... he offered them up entirely to God for God' mission... In less than 7 years, Martyn translated the Bible into Urdu and Persian and arranged of one of the first translations into Arabic... as well as preaching, teaching and engaging in dialogue with Muslims – Oh and by the way all this was in his 'spare time', because his 'day job' was being chaplain to the East India Company... a job that he had to take on because his father passed away before his departure and he had to provide for his whole family... because the CMS stipend was not sufficient ...

...But what impresses me about Martyn is not primarily his phenomenal intellectual abilities – if we look around a place like Cambridge there are many with such gifts – rather it is his awareness that these gifts and his life were created for a purpose... a purpose in God's mission... Martyn's training for his missionary work in India and Persia happened right here

in Cambridge... he trained in the church of England taking a curacy under Charles Simeon at Holy Trinity (in town) and was given charge of the parish of Lolworth...

... At that time in Cambridge there was a link between God's mission to revive the church in this land, and a move to see the Gospel transform entire nations and people overseas... this continued for over a hundred years, through the high point of the sending out of the Cambridge 7 in 1885... and into the beginning of the 20th Century...

... But where are the Henry Martyn's of today? ...I communicated just over a year ago with a lady who works at the Henry Martyn Centre and library in town and she remarked that after over 30 years in missionary work in the Indian sub-continent, upon her return to Cambridge she was shocked at the lack of understanding, awareness and most of all the desire amongst today's Christians in Cambridge for world mission...

... of course the world we live in is very different isn't it... we are a post-modern, pluralistic, relativistic, materialistic and very secular society... and I think it's fair to say that, when it comes to World Mission, many of us in the church are suffering from what the Gambian theologian Lamin Sanneh, calls the "Post-Colonial Western Guilt Complex"...

...But I want to suggest to you this morning that though our context is very different to the world that Martyn lived in, our God and his gospel... his mission to revive His church in this land and to see the nations transformed by this same Good News hasn't changed...

...it's easy to be starry-eyed and romantic about that Great Evangelical Awakening and the birth of the Modern Missionary Movement... but we need to recognise that **conflict** was part and parcel of the spread of God's mission... **External conflict** and **internal conflict**. Of course we know about the *external* conflict... right back in the early church... in Acts ch7 after Stephen's martyrdom and at various stages in the story of the early church... it was the same for the many missionaries throughout the Modern Missionary Movement –However there was also *internal* conflict...conflict *within* the church to what God was doing... Charles Simeon who mentored Henry Martyn and who was so influential in supporting and promoting overseas mission, experienced significant opposition from within the church for preaching the Gospel and for his role in the development of the CMS and the CMJ...

...Just a decade and a half before Henry Martyn left for India, William Carey, who is credited with being the father of the Modern Missionary Movement (**PP Slide 3**) faced criticism from many senior Christian leaders whose reading of the Bible told them that the 'heathen' of India were God's concern and that if, in God's sovereignty, God wanted to save them, He could do that. – They weren't wrong on one level, and yet their theological predisposition (a

type of hyper-Calvanism) kept them from seeing another more fundamental truth in the Bible, ... God's passion and the church's commission to see the nations blessed!

... there **were** conflicts in the church... and yet through them God used William Carey, Henry Martyn and hundreds of other missionaries who went out at great cost for the 150 years that followed, so that today we are rejoicing in the fruits of their sacrifice as we watch the churches of the non-Western world continue to grow.

- Carey and Martyn were not perfect but they and their fellow workers:

- 1) Knew God's story – God's mission in all its breadth
- 2) Knew their own story – who they were in Christ - how they fitted into God's story – where they had come from...
- 3) They engaged with the cultures to which God had called them...

- But what about today? What kind of conflicts are we facing in our churches today? (**PP slide 4**) What is the culture to which God has called us? Is God's mission being fulfilled through us? Do you:

- 1) Know God's story – God's mission in all its breadth...?
- 2) Know your own story – who you are in Christ - how you fit into this God's story – where you have come from...?
- 3) Know the culture/s to which God has called you...?

- I want us to keep these questions in our minds as we go through Acts 15...

- Acts 15 speaks to heart of God's purpose in restoring a lost humanity to himself and it charts probably the most significant transition of the Gospel from the predominantly Jewish setting of Jerusalem to the Greco-Roman culture of the 1st Century.

- But this isn't only about the 1st Century church, it about the church throughout the ages since Pentecost... it's about the church today... it's about All Saints Church in May 2010... and fundamentally it's about God's mission from the particular to the universal... in Acts 15 the particular / unique context of a dispute between early Jewish believers in Judea and Antioch to the universal context of the Gentile world.

- In his excellent book *Bible and Mission*, Richard Bauckham points out that this development from *particular* to *universal* is a cyclical process that is "always beginning again from the biblical narratives" and "figuratively starting again from Jerusalem (of our own

cultural contexts) to the ends of the earth". The central place that this account has in the progress from Jerusalem to the "ends of the earth" is part of a pattern that the risen Lord Jesus described to the disciples before the ascension.

- Look with me at Acts 1:8, which I was really pleased to see is your key verse for this month... **(Read) – (Read 4 parts + explain the sub divisions)**

- Acts 15 is at the crossroads of God's mission, which is both *macropedic* - massive in scope and universal, and *microscopic* - focussed on the details of both Paul and Barnabas's friction ... their disagreement with some other Jewish believers in the mid 40's AD and the if correctly applied, by the power of the Holy Spirit, applies to the minutiae of our lives, and perhaps the frictions we experience as we work out God's mission in and through us at All Saints today.

- Lets look at the conflict in our passage, and first of all examine the problem **(PP slide 5)**

The Problem

A focus on Tradition, Law and Status

-v1 tells us where this particular problem started. *"Some men came down from Judea... teaching Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you can not be saved"*.

- We know them by other names in the NT, the *'party of the Pharisees'*, *'Judaizers'* or the *'circumcision group'*. Paul has quite a bit to say about them in Galatians, calling them *agitators* and in Philippians 3 *mutilators of the flesh*.

- Of course we know the story... these are the bad guys aren't they? But stop for a moment and consider a few things about their position:

1) There is nothing in this chapter to suggest that they were rejecting Gentiles per se – just because they were foreign... their issue was with how gentiles could be saved.

2) It may well have been that their concern was genuinely for the purity of the church and of 'table fellowship' in the context of all sorts of pagan practices. And finally and most importantly...

3) Their argument was Biblical! Wasn't it? It fact they were appealing to a direct command of God to the covenant people of God in Genesis 17:10

“This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.”

- and remember there was no New Testament to refer to at that time! The OT was their Bible!
- So circumcision was no light matter, it was nothing less than the covenant sign that they belonged to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!
- It is worth noting that when Christians argue it is rarely the case that one party deliberately sets out to deceive and selfishly distort the Word of God...But nonetheless we so often get it wrong... as Jesus points out in Matthew 23, we so easily *neglect the more important matters of the law* for defence of our traditions, our rules (however good they may have been) and the status that we so often gain from them.
- You see, it was not that circumcision was a bad thing but that these believers had elevated it to a defining standard of orthodoxy and in so doing had failed to understand what was at the heart of the Law at the heart of the Gospel... of God’s mission... and this is so often what the church has done throughout the ages... **(PP slide 6)**

A Dispute

- v2 So a *sharp dispute* (read into that all the heat of a big argument – the original means something more like *uproar* or *dissent*) – this was unlikely to have been a cold emotionless affair ... **(mimic 2 sides ...if time)**
- If you want to see the content of what might have been in that clash, just read Paul and Barnabas side of the clash in Galatians 2.
- Conflict is unavoidable in church life...(we won’t even get to the end of this chapter without a major disagreement between Paul and Barnabas) in fact it’s normally a sign that we are making progress...

A loss of vision for God’s mission in the world

- ...however our response to the conflict can vary so much. **(PP slide 7)** So often it results in us entrenching ourselves in our traditions, our rules and preserving our status....and losing our vision of God and his purpose...
- This conflict could have seen a definitive split, as has happened so often in our church history...

The Response

A decision to seek help

- ...But it didn't, **(PP slide 8)** it resulted in a decision to seek help, to expose the matter to those in authority in Jerusalem and the wider community of believers.
- Notice in v3 and 4 that as Paul and Barnabas make their way to Jerusalem they are still full of joy in what God has done and is doing among the Gentiles. Their whole approach in this matter is characterised by gratitude to God and God-oriented worship....
- But notice how this is in contrast to the position of the *party of the Pharisees* who restate their case, which is all about preserving the Law of Moses, and with that their traditions and status.

A gathering (uniting) to consider the matter

- v6 tells us that they *met to consider this question (PP Slide 9)* and v7 that there was *much discussion*. We are not given an exact time frame but the picture is not that of a hasty 'quick fix'.
- Note that those who met were not necessarily pre-disposed to support Paul and Barnabas' position... the Law of Moses was precious to them.
- For Peter, who speaks first this was not an easy issue... you can see that from the references that Paul makes in Galatians 2 that he slipped up in this area...
- For James (the brother of Jesus - and a senior figure in the leadership in Jerusalem) also this was not easy, he was, as one commentator puts it; *"the champion of the conservative Jewish outlook"*.
- But they opened themselves up to each other, to the Holy Spirit and to the whole authority of God in his word, and not just the bits that made them feel comfortable.

A decision inspired by the Holy Spirit and based on God's Word

- ...and what resulted was a decision inspired by the Holy Spirit and immersed in God's purpose in his Word. **(PP slide 10)**
- Notice the presence of the Holy Spirit and their reference to God's purpose (*God's Mission*) in His Word in their deliberations and their response:
- Peter speech in v7-11 is, like Paul and Barnabas' report earlier totally God oriented:

- 7b ...**God** made a choice

- v8 ...**God**, who knows the heart... **He** accepted them... giving the **Holy Spirit** to them – this is a reference to Acts 10 when God pours out his Spirit on those Gentiles gathered at Cornelius's house:

- v9 ... **He** made no distinction... **He** purified their hearts...

- v10 So why are you trying to test **God**

- James does the same in his speech in v14 and v19 and then later in v28 we can see from the letter that they send with the apostles the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; *"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you..."* ...

- we can assume by this that their deliberations were not just the out-workings of their own wisdom, but the result of deliberately enquiring of God... how often is that the case in our corporate decision making? (**Piper story re Fasting + 80 % of decisions not found in Bible ?**)

- However notice also how both Peter and James emphasise God's purpose in his Word from the very beginning to bring **All Nations** to himself...

- Peter makes the point in v7 *"God made a choice among you that the **Gentiles** might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe"* (**NOTE – the word 'Gentiles' is 'Ethnos' – same word used in Matt 28, same word in Greek translation of Gen 12**) – in fact Peter is almost certainly referring to Gen 12 (calling of Abraham) and other passages repeated throughout the OT that repeat this theme.

- Then James does the same thing in v15-18 by going to the prophet Amos, and referring in v17 to God's purpose in drawing the Gentiles (again **nations**) to himself....

...and he points out that this, as difficult as it may seem for those comfortable in their traditions and cultural forms, it is exactly what God had intended!

A re-capturing of vision for God's mission

- what is it that he intends? ...(**PP slide 11**) v7 that *"Gentiles ('nations' – again same word - **Ethnos**) might hear"* - hear what? *"the message of the gospel and believe"...*

- and what does Peter say about the heart of this message? v8 that *"God... accepted them"* v9 NOT on the basis of the law or their traditions but *"by FAITH!!"* and v11 *"by GRACE!!"*

- Law and traditions are therefore **irrelevant** to salvation and more than that are a yoke and barrier to God's mission succeeding!
- ... I wonder what else, that is irrelevant to salvation, we have elevated to a defining mark of authentic Christianity?
- so why have we struggled to get this simple yet powerful message right over the ages?
- Perhaps as you hear those words of Peter about **Faith** and **Grace** you are reminded of cry of Luther and the other Reformation fathers "*In Christ alone... by Grace alone and through the Word and faith alone...*" ... and as good

Reformed Evangelical believers we know the story well... we've rehearsed the arguments...we know who the bad guys are... perhaps Catholics who rely on '**works**' to "participate" in the salvation process.... Or perhaps its ultra charismatic's who insist on certain spiritual gifts as a "sign" of authentic conversion...

- but what about us? ... are we not also prone to Pharisaical legalism in our desire to preserve orthodox doctrine?
- In the last few years the evangelical church in the UK has been witnessing a dispute about the doctrine of Justification, so fundamental to understanding the Gospel message
...indeed the scriptures teach us to *defend* and *confirm* the gospel and preserve sound teaching...
- However in some parts of our evangelical tradition much of this debate is no more than defensive "*manning of the barricades*" of one re-telling of the Gospel, as if our Gospel was no more than a formula...and by preserving the right terminology we can further God's mission...

...But our Gospel is so much bigger and more life giving than this... And the most convincing way in which we will preserve this message is to live it and? God's mission will be accomplished in and through us when the Gospel is heard and seen in our lives... when we understand and embrace our identity in Christ, when we understand where we have come from and where we are going and when we can apply this to the culture/s that God is calling us to!

– By the way... John Piper's book on Justification – great example of loving conflict that I believe maintains the mission of God!

- and so, you might be asking, why, if God's mission, as James says in v19 ...is that we should "*not make things difficult for those who are turning to God*", why does he add the three exceptions in v20?

(a) was James adding to the Gospel message here?

(b) was he returning to the Law of Moses?

(c) or was he softening the offence of the Gospel so that it would be more palatable to Jews and God fearing Gentiles?

I don't think it's exactly any of these. The point of these is missional!

(a) **Its about modelling.** Since the message was going out in areas where there were both Jews and God fearing Gentiles (v21 in cities, where Moses has been preached) James and Peter and Paul in many of his letter (esp 1 Corinthians) are at pains to encourage believers to **model** lives that live out the Gospel... **They don't want the freedom of the Gospel to be an obstacle to Jews and God fearing Gentiles!** The list was one of typical Gentile activities and for Jews and God-fearing Gentiles these were associated with God-less and degraded living... But these believers were to live distinctive lives that reflected God himself and His mission...His gospel. As Paul comments in 1 Cor 10:23; "*everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial*".

- Are all these activities therefore morally neutral? If I was preaching the Gospel to polygamous tribes in sub-Saharan Africa, should I do likewise? or what about Mauritania, where the divorce rate is 100% (i.e. its really part of the culture to divorce, many times), should I do the same for missional reasons?

... No, there is a distinction here between (a) meat of strangled animals and food polluted by idols and (b) sexual immorality. If you want to see this well developed, look at ch6 and ch8 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In ch8 Paul makes the distinction between;

(a) eating food sacrificed to idols, which neither brings us closer or separates us from God, but which should be approached for the benefit of the weaker brother... in other words for the building up of the church reasons, and in ch6...

(b) sexual immorality, which is a sin against your body, and therefore no matter what context or culture you live in will always be a sign that we belong to God and our bodies are the temple where his Spirit lives.

The Result

A united, joyful, worshipful release to God's mission

- So what is the result of this process – the decision and the way they went about it? (**PP slide 12**)

v22 – to the end of the chapter tells us that they returned with a letter v24-29 from the council affirming the decision... and notice in v25 and 26 how affirming the letter is about Paul and Barnabas, which doesn't just vindicate their ministry, but emphasises the strength of relationship...

- and they also showed their commitment to the Antioch church and the ministry of Paul and Barnabas by sending respected prophets (Judas and Silas) v32,33 to confirm this message and encourage the Antioch brothers – and we see in v31 the believers in Antioch were indeed encouraged and glad.

- ... in short God's mission did not only continue through this conflict, but the event saw the transition of the gospel from one predominant culture to another...

Summary Application:

So what does this mean for us this morning at All Saints in 2010?

- ...Well there are many ways we could apply the lessons of this passage, but I want to focus on 2 contexts that until fairly recently have been separate but are now increasingly coming together.

(a) The first is the context of the Muslim World – as the gospel has gone out to the *ends of the earth* it is now the '*centre*' from where it first went out which is now the most 'unreached' part of the world... I am not going to say much about now, but if you are around at lunch or this afternoon, I will share on this a little more...

(b) The second is the UK, where Christianity has been in recession for some time (a lot longer than the economy!) What can we learn from Acts 15?:

1) Conflict does not have to destroy the church, but if responded to humbly can be the vehicle for God's mission to continue through us. Do we believe this?

2) The church took time in the presence of the Holy Spirit to decide how to proceed.

Do we take time in the presence of God, corporately, to seek Him about His mission through us?

3) The church decided together – unity was maintained – even those in opposition seemed to agree – relationship were maintained and strengthened through this conflict.

4) Salvation can not come from the preservation of the Law or traditions but is by grace and through faith and often involves us stepping out of our comfort zones. God's mission continued because the believers were able to distinguish (in the presence of the Holy Spirit and with a full understanding of God's Word) between their religious and cultural traditions and the heart of the Gospel.

- I wonder how dearly we hold on to forms or a culture of church that we see as essential to the process of making disciples in and through our church... these may not be bad in themselves, but are not essential to carrying out God's mission through us? Are we able to make that distinction between our religious and cultural traditions and the heart of the Gospel? Do we know the message of the whole Bible or just a few parts of it that we are very familiar with?

5) (and finally) God's mission from the beginning determined their view of how to proceed in this conflict in Acts 15...

- ...They knew who they had become in Christ, they looked back and understood how God's story had developed, where they fitted in, and where God was leading them as they evaluated the conflict before them...

- Do you know you are in Christ today at All Saints in 2010? Do you know God's mission and where you fit in...? Where you have come from...? and where you are going? ...Individually (in the minutia of your lives) and corporately as the local body at All Saints? Do you know where you are going and how God is calling you to carry out his mission to the culture/s around you?

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)