

We interrupt our reflections on the first-reading inspired heroes of the Old Testament in order to look at Paul's Letter to the Galatians which we have been listening to for a number of weeks, but passing over at homily-time. It shows Paul in anything but heroic mould. I have kept insisting that there are no plaster saints in the Hebrew Bible, and we extend that to say there are not many in the New Testament or the Church. Even the greatest saints are flawed, have deficiencies of character, are weak, and in Paul's case with regard to this Letter, all these things and downright rude as well.

Paul was an enthusiast. Whatever he set his mind to he would put all his energy into it, and not understand why others did not share his passion, his determination, his single-mindedness. Paul was a difficult companion.

He has passed through Galatia, a broad swathe of what we call Turkey (we are not quite sure where his journey took him) and he was taken ill. The Galatians look after him and nursed him to health. He reminds them that they would have given him their eyes which might suggest he had a sight-problem. He spent some time with them and, naturally, used the opportunity to preach the Gospel to them and was well received. Having moved on, he has now found out that other Christians followed him and have re-instructed the Galatians; corrected 'faults', as they see it, in what Paul has told them. In particular, they are insisting that the Galatians to be true to the real Gospel must embrace the Law of Moses, be circumcised, follow the dietary rules and be good Jews in order to be good Christians.

Paul is furious. He has argued around the Mediterranean that Gentiles are not bound by Moses' Law. Christ has freed us from that slavery. Unfortunately, in his anger he writes some very unfortunate things which must have damaged him mightily in the eyes of the Galatians, and has done him no favours since. With regard to circumcision, he expresses regret that the knife had not slipped during the operation. He berates Peter, who was happy to eat with Gentiles until these people from Jerusalem arrived and then his attitude turned through 180 degrees and he would eat with Gentiles no longer. Paul has no time for hypocrisy, even when it is the chief apostle whom he is criticising.

Paul gives us some valuable information about his own biography as he defends his role as an apostle who has met the risen Lord. Presumably his opponents have been saying that his Gospel is inauthentic as he never met Jesus, which was true. And Jesus himself was circumcised (also true) and Jesus never taught that circumcision was unnecessary or abrogated any of the Mosaic teachings (again true). Paul has an uphill struggle, and his angry tone does not help him.

In today's passage he has a great sound-bite about the new freedom won in Christ. In Christ, he says, there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female; all are one in Christ. Like all *bon mots*, it sounds terrific but out of context it is open to huge misunderstanding. We find this in the Church of Corinth which seems to have taken to heart Paul's words about there being neither male nor female. So some of the men thought it was now appropriate to be effeminate and the women thought they could wear their hair loose in public, a source of grave scandal to others in the community and the outside world. It is fine sounding to say there is neither slave nor free, and in the Sunday worship all could approach Word and Eucharist as equals, but the next day the slave was still bound to his master and required to obey. Woe betide the slave who thought he could approach his master as an equal outside the Christian fellowship.

Paul allows his emotions to control his reason. His anger alienated people who were well disposed towards him; entrenched the opposition of those who disagreed with him; and his clever ways with words made him a hostage to fortune when the words were remembered but the context which interpreted them was forgotten.

Paul set the direction the Church was to move in: out to the Gentiles and, inevitably, away from Judaism. His influence was immense. But he made mistakes. He misjudged situations and people. He was a difficult colleague. Like the heroes of the Hebrew Bible he knew so well, he was no plaster saint. He was flawed and weak, and depended on Christ who strengthens us in our weakness and perfects us in our frailty.