

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Third Sunday Before Lent (17th February 2019)

Sermon at Mattins, by The Rt Revd Dr Alan Chesters.

What have Hosea, a prophet of Israel in 8thc B.C. and the zealous apostle Paul in common? They certainly had a strong faith in the living God who was concerned for His people. Yet from those extracts of their messages which formed this morning's scripture readings, they were also united in a deep sense of sadness about the situation in which they find themselves and were anxious to bring about change.

In God's name Hosea denounced the major shortcomings of his wayward fellow citizens who were excited in the worship of pagan gods rather than in following the demands of God's covenant with His people. Neither kings nor any amount of offerings at shrines would help them on the way God had set before them. Having courageously denounced their practices, Hosea urged his people to sow righteousness, in order to reap the harvest of unfailing love, seeking after the Lord until he comes and showers righteousness upon them. Sad, even frustrated though Hosea was, yet he had hope that things can be made right, if Israel and its people would but keep God's Law.

In a similar vein, Paul was not happy with the Christian community in Galatia. As so often in his letters we find Paul addressing a particular issue in the church to which he was writing. We can but try to read between the lines if we are to appreciate his point. We do not have the full facts as to what was happening in the Galatian church, a church in which probably most of its members were Gentile converts. It seems that they were either lapsing towards the familiar practices and sharing in the festivals of the gods of the Greco/ Roman world or being persuaded by Jewish members that to be a real Christian required circumcision and to accept the dietary laws of Judaism. Whichever it was, Paul is clearly frustrated with their behaviour in that the tools, the 'props' of religious faith – festivals and seasons – had become more important than the Faith itself – something which is always a real spiritual danger for committed church people.

To add to his sense of disappointment, Paul had been ill, most likely an attack of malaria. Somehow in his absence, relations which were once joyful between them had broken down. The Galatian Christians clearly had tensions which had affected their respect for Paul. He also realised, as is so often the case, that had he been able to have a personal meeting with them, rather than correspond, things might have been sorted out. All he could do was to remind them of what they had been taught, of the loving bond which had once existed and plead with them to enjoy the freedom which the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings.

As I thought about the protests of Hosea and Paul I was reminded for that piece of

advice by the 18thc Irish philosopher Edmund Burke - 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing'. Hosea and Paul felt called by God to speak out against what they saw to be wrong. Whether that was Hosea addressing a whole nation or Paul struggling with the members of a local church, both faced down hostility to speak up for what they believed was right.

Christians today, leaders and members alike face similar challenges across the world and in this nation.

The particular issues may change but the need to protest remains. How else do we stand up for that basic belief that men and women are made in the image of God, that in Christ love of all irrespective of their status is the basis for how as a society we should treat people or the conviction that in the power of the Spirit lives can be changed for good? Is it a lack of nerve or the desire not to offend which at times seems to prevent, not just church leaders but us, as Christians individuals, from speaking up for the creation and a fair use of its resources, for the need to support the poor and vulnerable, for community to have priority over self?

Tolerance is often claimed to be the virtue of the English and not least the C. of E. but it must never for Christians be an excuse for silence when we others being oppressed or supports the belief that anything goes, that there are no God given parameters to human behaviour for as every news bulletin reveals such attitudes so often lead people into some form of mental or physical impoverishment. With St Paul we need to have the courage to present our faith in Jesus Christ in a way which expresses joy rather than negativity, to communicate the faith which empowers us to share not only the resources of the creation but offers that hope in the overriding love of God giving a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives.