

SUNDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2020 ONLINE SERVICE

EPHESIANS 1: 15-23

Thank you to Lottie for reading to us so beautifully from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

This is such an inspiring passage in which Paul pours out his thankfulness to God for the Ephesian Christians and encourages them by telling them of his prayers on their behalf.

Before we look further at Paul's words, let's first look at the context of the passage – always a good thing to do because it gives us further insights into the teaching within it.

The city of Ephesus was the most important city in western Asia Minor, now Turkey. It had a harbour, it was at an intersection of major trade routes and it was a busy prosperous commercial centre.

It was also renowned for its pagan temple dedicated to the Roman goddess Diana, known in Greek as Artemis, with thousands of visitors coming to it each year.

And it was not a comfortable setting for the church. Paul was nearly overcome by a rioting mob in Ephesus once, because he was growing the church there so successfully that he was seriously affecting the trade of the silversmiths who made pagan artefacts.

So that's the backdrop to this letter - a prosperous city, a centre of pagan worship, with serious ill-will towards the burgeoning church.

Quite a tough environment then for those Ephesian Christians.

And as for Paul himself, he wasn't having an easy time either as he was writing to them from prison.

Paul had been a person of standing – a highly educated religious leader -and now he was in prison for his faith.

All the more inspiring then that he doesn't lament his plight or seek sympathy from his readers.

Not a hint of self-pity here. Instead his focus is wholly on them, to encourage them.

He writes of his thankfulness to God for them, he writes of his prayers for them and he writes to open their eyes to the hope they have as the people of God.

'For this reason', he says, 'ever since I heard about your faith, I have not stopped giving thanks for you'

And the reason is that the Ephesians have heard the gospel, believed it and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is so thankful to God for this and he wants them to know he holds them in his prayers.

The first thing he asks for then for them is the Spirit of wisdom and revelation

And by this he means wisdom from God rather than greater human wisdom.

This kind of wisdom is a humble knowledge of God (rather than just information about him) and a sense of how to live.

And revelation is an insight into God's ways and purposes, which you could never access by human reason alone

which leads you into that quality of life which is **real** life – life as it was meant to be.

And why does Paul pray for wisdom and revelation?

So that they may know God better.

This is Paul's answer to the pressures the Ephesians faced – and to the pressures we face.

To know God better – and we need to make that a priority in our lives.

That was what got Paul through many trials.

And it is what will get us through our trials too and will change us into His likeness.

God delights to impart his wisdom and revelation to us so that we may become more like him.

And doesn't that show us what a high status we have in God?

I've touched on this before in my preaching but I think it is worth repeating in the culture of celebrity in which we live.

Many aspire to celebrity status in the world. That for them would be success – to have everyone recognise them and want to be like them.

But wanting that kind of recognition is chasing an empty dream – public opinion can be fickle – one day you're in and the next you're out - and the media can be intrusive and sometimes cruel.

So why chase after that when you can have the highest status of all – being recognised by God as His child.

Just step out and look at the natural world in all its wonder and beauty and say with confidence – My Father has made all of this, he holds it all together and he keeps it all going.

In terms of who you know, it doesn't get any better than that!

And furthermore, he gives you acceptance and forgiveness, boundless love and endless grace.

Why seek status anywhere else? You have the very best on offer to you in God.

His wisdom and revelation enable you to see that, and to embrace the paradoxes that so often are part of the Christian faith and the Christian life.

The question of the crucifixion of Jesus, for example.

Reading about that from a human point of view you might think -how unfortunate for Jesus that the crowd chose Barabbas over him.

But it wasn't anything to do with ill-fortune and everything to do with God's amazing plan of Salvation.

Revelation enables us to see that it was only through the death and the resurrection of Jesus that we could have eternal life.

And wisdom enables us to put that revelation into practice and see God's purpose being worked out.

Paul then moves on to talk about hope

'I pray', he says, 'that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened so that you may know the hope to which God has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints'

When God opens the eyes of our heart we begin to see things we cannot see with the physical eye.

Hope for instance –the hope to which God has called you.

And what is this hope?

Well – it is not that uncertain feeling of mingled longing and misgiving as when we say – I hope it will be a fine day tomorrow –knowing it may well be nothing of the kind

Rather, Christian hope is a glad confidence of good things to come when we will be with Christ forever.

It is sure, not tentative.

It is hope for life here on earth too that whatever it holds – Lockdown for example. We are walking with God who has promised never to fail us or forsake us.

This hope is part of the riches of the glorious inheritance that is yours as a child of God.

Paul is telling us that in God we are rich indeed.

And thinking of the riches of God puts me in mind of Bobby Ball, who came here in 2012.

Some of you may remember the fabulous evening's entertainment we had with him and the Festival choir.

Bobby died recently and an interview with him of a few years ago was included in his obituary on the radio.

He spoke of how he came to faith – and it was through the theatre chaplain Max who called backstage to see him one night.

Bobby didn't really have any time for religion– he was more interested in going out for a drink. And he told the chaplain this.

And the chaplain said – well can I come with you?

And that's what he did. And Bobby said he got talking to him and attacked him about God. But he realised that for all the fame success and riches of this world that he Bobby had, he didn't have what Max had.

Max had an inner peace and contentment from God that money just couldn't buy.

Bobby said: One day I asked to speak to him and after a while he said, 'Let's pray.' I'd never prayed in my life but we prayed and it just changed my life - like that [he snaps his fingers]."

Shortly afterward Bobby became a [Christian](#).

Max had the riches Paul is talking about here in Ephesians and that was what drew Bobby to faith.

Riches beyond any earthly price yet openly and freely lavished upon us by God's ever-flowing fountain of grace.

And along with riches, says Paul, comes the hope of power - the incomparably great power – for us who believe.

Right now, I think many of us need to feel that power at work in us don't we?

We are weary of Covid 19 and Lockdown 2. We are missing our family and friends and the life we used to have and sometimes we just feel as though we just can't take any more.

At a time like this then, it's so important that we remind ourselves that we have the power of God available to us – power which Paul says is the same as the mighty strength which raised Christ from the dead.

The question though, for many of us, is – how do we access it?

Two thoughts on that

First, we need to believe that we **can** access God's power – but that can be difficult if we feel utterly powerless and faith is perhaps at a low ebb.

So, if all we can manage is the honest prayer – Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief, then that is enough.

God hears and answers prayer like that. And you will begin to see God's power at work in your life. Read Mark 9 to see a worked example of this.

Secondly – pray and keep praying. Pray without ceasing as Paul says in his letter to another church in Thessalonica.

This doesn't necessarily mean spend the whole of the day on your knees – it is rather practising the presence of Jesus with you throughout your day and constantly referring people, circumstances and your own needs to him.

If it helps to have an image, see every day as being like the journey to Emmaus those two disciples went on just after Jesus had died.

Jesus drew alongside them, they conversed together and he taught and guided them.

See him drawing alongside you every day, always there, listening, teaching and guiding.

If you find prayer a bit of a struggle sometimes, (and who doesn't?) request one of our prayer bags. I have one here I made earlier!

It contains suggestions and aids for different ways of praying and they are freely available – just email me if you would like one.

At the end of this passage from Ephesians, we are given great assurance that Jesus, who is far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, has all things under his feet.

All things.

Which includes whatever we are facing, dealing with or struggling and life has extra stresses for so many at the moment with Covid 19 stalking the land.

Sometimes the world can seem all too real – and God can seem far away and somewhat unreal.

So we need to build ourselves up by reading the Bible, by praying as much as we can, by keeping in contact with one another and by encouraging each other as much as possible to keep us rooted in the reality of the living Christ who is here with us in it all.

And more than ever, we need to hear him speak to us to keep things in perspective.

Every now and again my somewhat vivid imagination produces dreams that could have come from the plot of a good thriller – climbing up a cliff-face, for example, with the enemy climbing up behind me, gaining on me every second because I just can't move fast enough.

Some of you might have had dreams like that yourself

I remember one such dream and I woke up, fearful and trembling shouting no no!

And then hearing Mike's voice saying 'what's the matter'

And I replied – they're after me – they're gaining on me

Or something like that

And then Mike saying 'No they're not – it's alright – you're at home. You're safe. Everything's fine.'

And oh the reassurance of his voice breaking into this nightmare world, getting things back in perspective for me.

Well it's a bit like that when we are in the thick of it in our lives

We need to hear a reassuring voice.

And passages like this one from Ephesians come into their own, speaking words of reassurance and peace from God to us in this all too real and fallen world, imparting power to cope.

When we start believing them and putting them into practice, we will begin to change in our attitude to life and its problems.

The change may be slow – almost imperceptible at first – but it will come as God's power begins to work in you.

That power is on offer and available to us now through the Holy Spirit – so let us all invite him afresh to fill our lives with his power, his wisdom, his peace and his love.

Ephesians 1:15-23 Thanksgiving and prayer

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit^{ff} of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

STUDY QUESTIONS for SUNDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2020

Read Ephesians 1:15-23

- Verse 15 begins with 'For this reason'. Look back at Ephesians 1:13-14 to find out what this reason is. Why does it make Paul thankful?
- Explore what 'hope' means in a Christian context in comparison with everyday usage of the word. What is the hope to which God has called us? (vs 18)
- Unpack the phrase 'the riches of his glorious inheritance'. What are these 'riches' which are ours?
- Look at v. 19. How does Paul describe the power available to the believer? What does Paul say God did to demonstrate just how powerful he really is?
- Sometimes we struggle and feel powerless. What should we do then? What steps can we take to help us access the power available to us in Christ?
- Have you ever doubted your own self-worth? How does seeing yourself through God's eyes help you see the value you really have in the eyes of your Creator?
- God raised Jesus from the dead and he has placed all things under his feet (vs 22). What does this tell us about the extent of God's power?
- Can we learn anything about how to develop our prayer life from what Paul tells us about his in this passage?