

## Trinity 8 2015 – Ephesians as a Summary of the Gospel

II Kings 4 vv 42-44 p372, Psalm 145, Ephesians 3 vv 14-21 p1175, John 6 vv 1-21 p1069

The New Testament lesson these few weeks takes us through St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. It is an epistle which contains some wonderful and very well known passages. It occurs to me that it takes us through what the Gospel is about.

As with all the epistles, Paul begins by greeting his readers. We are one in the Lord. Next he blesses God, Who *has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*. Our fellowship with God is God's initiative. Our response is dependent on God's initiative. Our response is worship, adoration and praise. God is sovereign. The whole universe of time and space is in His hands. Our lives are in His hands. He loves us in all eternity. His plan for each one of us is part of His eternal plan for the whole of creation. He has adopted us as His children because that is what is God's eternal, sovereign will for us. God is sovereign. Time and space are in His hands. His providential will for us is eternal. Yet everything depends on one particular event, which occurred at a particular time, in a particular place, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is the outpouring of the eternal love of the eternal God on the Cross at Calvary which makes it possible for our sins to be forgiven, for us, for you and me, to become the adopted sons and daughters of God and for the whole of creation to be redeemed. *That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him*. This is our inheritance as the children of God. Through the grace of God, we have believed and God has given us His Holy Spirit, by Whom we now know God and in Whom we have a foretaste of the infinitely greater riches which God has prepared for us, His children, in the world to come. Paul goes on to thank God for Christian people and to pray that Christian people may have the grace to understand what all this means – that the sovereign God has chosen us and made us His own, through the shedding of Christ's Blood on the Cross, to appreciate that the Risen Christ fills all things, that He is above all things, that all things are one in Him, because in Him all things exist and in Him all things are redeemed and that the Body of Christ, Who is all in all, is in fact the Christian Church, of which, by grace, through faith, we are all members, if we are Christians.

In chapter 2, Paul reminds us what human beings are, what we are, without God. Sin alienates us from one another and alienates us from God. Without God, we are self-centred and self-centredness leads us into mistreating our fellow human beings and rebelling against God. The paradox of self-centredness is that we can never be fulfilled as people, we can never truly live, so long as we are unwilling to sacrifice self in the service of God and of other people. The result of our rebellion against God is death, spiritual death, eternal death. Only God Himself can save us, but, praise the Lord, that is just what He does in Christ Jesus. Christ endures our death. Our sins are put to death on His Cross. Through His grace, we are risen with Him and are made members of the Body of Him, Who is at the right hand of God in heavenly places. The gift God gives us through Christ's death on the Cross is eternal life in Him. He doesn't do this for us because we deserve it, which we don't; He does this simply because He loves us. Our salvation is God's sovereign will for us in all eternity. Faith is God's gift to us. It is not a response to our good works. On the contrary, we are God's workmanship, but He has prepared good works for us to perform as His people. That is our calling, our vocation, that, saved by grace through faith, we now work for God in the world, our part in His eternal plan for the cosmos.

Given that every member of God's Church is reconciled to God in Christ, granted that every one of us is at one with God in Jesus Christ, it follows that we must be at one with one another. There is no place for division in Christ's Body, the Church. Our calling is to be *one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth*, as the hymn puts it. There is no place for disunity between Jews and gentiles, between people of different races or between social classes. We are all one in Him. No-one comes to the Father except through Him. Everyone who comes to the Father comes through Jesus. So there can be no division between us. Jesus is the cornerstone. The apostles and prophets are the foundations. All the rest of us, all Christian people, are part of the same building, the same temple, the dwelling place of God. Every one one of us has his or her place and our right to take our place is God's gift to us in Christ.

In chapter 3, Paul writes about the fact that in the past it had not been appreciated that God's plan for humanity included the Gentiles as well as the Jews. The Jews were the chosen people, the royal priesthood and holy nation. The Gentiles were the outsiders. Now it has been revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit, that it is and always has been God's sovereign, eternal plan to redeem people of all nations through the Blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. There is no difference or distinction. We are all one in Him – a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Reading the Old Testament in the light of Christ and guided by His Holy Spirit, we can now see that it was always God's plan to redeem the whole of creation, not merely the descendants of Israel in the Holy Land. Israel was chosen as the people among whom the Messiah would be born and live and die and rise again for the salvation of the whole world.

We then get today's New Testament lesson, Paul's prayer for our fulfilment in Christ – that all these wonderful things may be true for us and that we may know them to be true in ourselves. I shall use this prayer at the end of today's sermon.

Paul begins chapter 4 by exhorting us *that ye walk worthy of the vocation with which ye are called*. He reminds us that he is writing this letter as a prisoner for the Christian cause. Surely, we who are not prisoners, we who are free and free from want, have no excuse for not fulfilling our calling as Christians. This calling, Paul says, starts with our unity in love, our unity with one another, our unity with Christ. *There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all*. We are all different. We all have different gifts and opportunities. That too is the work of God. The ascended Christ sends upon His Church His Holy Spirit, Who gives to every one of us the gifts and opportunities we require so that each one of us may play his or her part in God's work in the world today. Some people have special vocations like apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers. We should honour and support those vocations. But we are all called. God has prepared good works for every one of us to walk in. The work of God is body building, building up the Body of Christ. The work of God is to make us fitter and stronger in Christian service. The work of God is for the Church to grow. Crucially, we grow together, we build up one another. We are not narcissists, exercising alone in the gym, honing our own bodies to perfection as objects of grace and beauty; we are members of the same team, working together so that everyone fulfils his or her potential and makes his or her

contribution to the final victory. That we *may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ : from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*

The rest of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5 remind us that we are different. We are new men and women. We are sealed with the Spirit. We are set free from sin. As Christians, we are different from people in the world. Living in a country which for more than a thousand and five hundred years has claimed to be Christian, it is only too easy to assume that being a Christian is much the same thing as being a good English man or English woman. That is not the case. Very much higher standards are required of us. *Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children.* In terms of honesty, morality, patience, generosity and any other virtues you can think of, Christians are called to a much higher standard than is current in the world. The standard is Christ. There is no room for complacency. We are not to be afraid because we don't live up to the highest standards. Our God is merciful. But God's mercy is no reason not to seek His grace to do His Will perfectly.

There follows Paul's analogy of the Church as the bride of Christ. He loves us for better, for worse. He sacrifices himself for us. Our calling is to offer ourselves to Him, to love Him unconditionally. The two become one. Christian marriage reflects that relationship between Christ and the Church. Similarly in Chapter 6, the relationship between parents and children is to be modelled on the love of God and His commandments. Similarly the relationship between servant or worker and master or employer is modelled on our relationship with God. The servant serves as the servant of Christ. The master must never forget that he is subject to the divine Master.

Finally, before the valedictory notes, Paul reminds us that we cannot be Christians in our own strength. We need the whole armour of God if we are to overcome sin, the world and the devil: the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. We shan't do very well as Christians if we neglect the means of grace, forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, neglecting to participate on the Lord's Day in the Holy Communion, failing to read the Bible regularly, praying only rarely and reluctantly. We cannot live the Christian life in our own strength. We depend utterly on God. Thank God; God is utterly dependable. Let us pray:

<sup>14</sup> For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

<sup>15</sup> Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

<sup>16</sup> That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;

<sup>17</sup> That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,

<sup>18</sup> May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;

<sup>19</sup> And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

<sup>20</sup> Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,

<sup>21</sup> Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.