

Sermon - Ephesians 3: mystery, diversity, & God's fullness

Reviewing chapters 1 and 2

- Over the last two Sundays we have worked through chapters 1 and 2 of the letter to the Ephesians - not in close detail, but picking up on the overall theme, and the outline of what is being presented.
- Last week I pointed out that the focus of the letter was on those who *have* responded to God's choosing them to be adopted as his children, rather than focusing on those who have *not* responded to God.
- The letter to the Ephesians affirms and celebrates the inclusion of those who had formerly been excluded from God's kingdom.
- This is the key context of this letter.
- When reading through the Acts of the Apostles, which tells of the establishment and spread of the early church, time and again we read of conflict and tension amongst the Jewish Christians:
 1. firstly, about whether God intended the Gospel to be for the Gentiles as well, or not; and
 2. secondly, once the conversion of Gentile Christians was being more accepted, about whether they had to undertake a full conversion to Judaism, so that they could then be accepted as Jewish Christians.
- Many of the Jewish believers did not see themselves as having a separate religion, but as Jews who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah for whom they had been waiting.
- For them, Jesus was a Jewish Messiah for the Jews - and they were still God's chosen people, who merely focused on the Jewish teachings of a particular Jewish Rabbi, named Jesus.
- For them, if Gentiles wanted to accept and follow these teachings, then they needed to become Jews first - because it was the Jews, and the Jews alone, who were the children of God, and who inherited God's kingdom.
- So people like Paul, and Peter, and other Jewish believers - Jewish Christians - found themselves being confronted with the reality that God's Spirit was at work amongst the Gentile believers, regardless of whether they had converted to Judaism or not.
- And eventually recognised that they needed to cooperate with this new teaching from the Spirit - or find that they were working against the Spirit, and thus excluding themselves from God's kingdom.

- So, in writing to the Gentile Christians - those who were formerly excluded and referred to as 'the uncircumcision' - Paul, as a Jewish Christian, reassures them that they *are* included.
- He says that they were already chosen by God, before creation, to be included - to be adopted as God's children, and thus to share in the inheritance of God's people.
- He reminds them that they used to follow their own way, which took them away from the source of life.
- And that through God's gift of his Son Jesus, they have been able to find a new way - the way of sacrificial love, which is the way of life.
- Jesus has reconciled both groups - those who were on the inside and those who were on the outside - to God.
- In Jesus both groups are united into one group, and they are, as Paul writes:

built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God. (Ephesians 2.22)
- And, in engaging with this letter to the Ephesians, I have suggested that God is speaking again to us as well - that we need to pay attention, as if this letter was written personally to us, too.

The sacrificial love of the former persecutor

- Paul starts chapter 3 by saying: *This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles (Ephesians 3.1)*

Sermon - Ephesians 3: mystery, diversity, & God's fullness

- and he ends the paragraph by stating: *I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory. (Ephesians 3.13)*
- Quite simply he is stating that he has been imprisoned because the authorities didn't like him preaching the Gospel of Christ - from which they have benefited - but that for him it has been an opportunity to share in Christ's way of sacrificial love, and that God is glorified through the consequences of the readers becoming joint heirs.
- From verse 2 he continues:
for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Ephesians 3.2-6)
- At this point it is good to be reminded of what happened to Paul, as described in the book of Acts.
- When the early church was growing in Jerusalem, Paul, then named Saul, was a zealous Pharisee who was outraged by the apparent heresies of the Jewish followers of the maverick rabbi called Jesus.
- He actively persecuted them, having them imprisoned, and stoned, and excluded from the synagogues.
- When he heard that they were spreading their so-called heresies in Damascus as well, he travelled there, and on the way had a dramatic conversion experience.
- In this experience he found himself effectively blinded by the light of Christ, and was in darkness for three days, before God sent Ananias to lay hands upon Saul and pray - whereupon he could see clearly.
- This was Saul's death and resurrection experience in his life, and he was baptised and subsequently became known as Paul.
- In his three days in the dark, Paul experienced a fundamental paradigm shift to his world-view.
- Everything that he thought he had understood - and being a very intelligent and educated man, he understood a lot - everything was turned upside down, or rather, was turned right way up.
- I suggest that it was this experience, and comparable experiences by the other '*holy apostles and prophets*', that effectively revealed the mystery - effected as a consequence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The rich variety of the wisdom of God

- Paul continues from verse 8:
... this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3.8-10)
- I want to emphasise this last statement: *... so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.*
- This is such an important statement, because it acknowledges that God's wisdom is revealed through the Church, in its rich variety.

Sermon - Ephesians 3: mystery, diversity, & God's fullness

- For Paul, God's wisdom can be seen and is made tangible, not in the Church being homogenous, and everyone being exactly the same, and engaging in their faith relationships with God in exactly the same way -
- No, rather God's wisdom is made tangible in the variety - the rich variety - found in the Church.
- Different kinds of people, different ways of worshipping, different ways of praying, different ways of understanding God's Word, different ways of living out faith relationships.
- For me - at this time when there are people in the Anglican Church, here in Australia and elsewhere, who reject this diversity, and who want to exclude other ways of understanding the Gospel, and exclude other Christians whom God has chosen before the creation of the world - this is such a reassurance.
- That God values and celebrates diversity.
- For Paul this is self-evident, since Jesus clearly overcame the most fundamental divide between those who were deemed to be God's people, and those who were deemed to be excluded - because they did not live like Jews, and they were not marked like Jews.

- He emphasises this point of God's inclusiveness, to the fullest extent of diversity, when he writes:
For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. (Ephesians 3.14-15)
- That is, every family can find their origin in God, because God chooses everyone.
- After all, when God blessed Abram in Genesis 12.3, he promised: *'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'*

Prayer for the fullness of God

- And Paul affirms this blessing in the wonderful prayer that concludes this chapter.
- It is a prayer of petition to God, that we may be strengthened in our faith, which is founded on love.
- It is a prayer of petition that we may be *filled with the fullness of God*.
- *Filled with all the fullness of God* - what a wonderful prayer to pray!
- It is also a prayer of praise and worship, because it describes who and what God is for us, and glorifies God, and includes us in participating in that 'glory in the church'.

- So I'll end by repeating these final verses, but as a prayer for ourselves too, here and now.
*I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,
he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through his Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.
I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
Now to him who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations,
for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3.16-21)*

Note: all quoted Scripture is from the NRSV