

Eph 3:1-13: The Wonderful Mission of the People of God

You might not like speeches or lectures that wander off the subject – or sermons that do the same! But the early church leader the apostle Paul in our reading from Ephesians does that sort of thing. Verses 2-13 are like a parenthesis, when Paul digresses off his theme somewhat. He sort of interrupts his ‘flow’.

In v1, he says, “For this reason”. Then in v2 he breaks off into his digression, then in v14, he resumes where he left off in v1, saying “For this reason” he prays for the Ephesian Christians as he does in vs15-21. We’ll hear from Ann about this prayer next week!

“For this reason” indicates Paul is referring to what he wrote before in his letter. He’s just been explaining in Ch 2 that God had brought Gentile Christians together with Jewish believers into the church. This leads him to diverge off to write specifically of the work, the mission, God gave him. And we see from v13 that this speaking of his ministry would help the Ephesian Christians not to be discouraged by his suffering – v1 says he was a prisoner - which was because of his mission for their sake. His role in God’s plan to include Gentiles was why he was a prisoner, and so his suffering was part of God’s salvation plan for the world.

You may have noticed a recurring mention in these verses of a “mystery”. Paul’s mission was to do with this mystery, as we’ll see. So we’re going to look at first the mystery, then at the mission - which is the wonderful mission Christians have as the people of God, then a witness.

First, the Mystery

You may like “Who dunnit?” crime mysteries. Since marriage I have been educated a little in Agatha Christie Poirot films! All during the film, the identity of the culprit is of course a mystery, with even the police often getting it wrong, although they may have followed good circumstantial evidence. But always at the end of the films, the ultimate never-wrong detective Poirot reveals who it was and explains the evidence...the mystery is now fully revealed. All is explained. I have been given to understand that Mrs Marple does the same: she reveals the mystery at the end!

Ephesians ch 3 says that the mystery of Christ was once a secret, sort of unresolved, for a long time. Before Jesus came, in the Old Testament such as in the prophecies in Isaiah, there were clues that all nations would one day come and worship the true God. But the Jews expected this would involve large scale conversion to Judaism among the nations. However the result of the coming of Jesus and His death and resurrection was an entirely new people consisting of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, not loads of non-Jews becoming Jews. So the “mystery” is that it is God’s plan to create a people, the church, made up of Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. The mystery has now been fully understood! It’s now an open secret.

We see this from v6: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

Gentiles who have faith in Jesus are now brought in to be part of God's people the church, which is also called Christ's body. Jewish and Gentile Christians are united as one people. Both share the promises and blessings that come through trusting in Christ. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians share the blessing that Abraham the father of faith, knew that being in the favour of God is through faith and not our efforts. And both share in the promise of God's presence which begins now through the Holy Spirit, and is fully experienced in the future new creation. All this means that God's plan is to have people from every nation and race and background in His church and to come to God and to know Him personally.

Jesus' death on the cross opened the way for people from all nations to come to God and into His family the church. No-one is excluded by their race or nationality or background.

"Gentiles" is a term used for all non-Jews. And the Jews considered the Gentiles to be impossibly far from God's grace, love and His promises. So, that God includes Gentiles in His church means He calls all types of people to Himself. That includes those who seem most 'unlikely' and who seem far from any interest in Jesus.

And therefore to any here who cannot say they've put their trust in Jesus, I say do not exclude yourself. Background doesn't matter. What matters is trusting in Christ. Whatever you have been through, whatever sins you have committed, you're never too far away from God and His forgiveness. Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment we deserve so we don't have to suffer it and so that we can be forgiven and have access to God. Turn away from sin and receive Jesus as your Lord. Receive God's forgiveness through trusting in Jesus.

So the mystery is that God wants people from all nations and all backgrounds to come to Him and know Him through faith in Christ and to be part of God's family the church.

Second, the Mission

V6 says that it is *through the gospel*, that the Gentiles, and that includes us, are brought in. The gospel is the good news of God's grace, his undeserved kindness to us, whereby Jesus died to pay for our sins to bring us to God.

So in vs 2 and 9 Paul tells of his mission as an "administration" of God's grace. This means he's like trustees of a charity who have the responsibility for the stewardship or administration of the charity's funds and resources – perhaps like the PCC of this church.

Then in v8 he explains more. Let's ponder this verse for a moment. In it Paul says, "Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ" God gave him the grace to *preach* the boundless, or the unsearchable, riches of Christ. It's by preaching, and sharing the Gospel that God's plan to include people from every nation in His church is accomplished.

Paul sees the gospel as the boundless riches of Christ. Have you ever seen or experienced something, maybe stunning scenery, or maybe a truth about Jesus and God's love, so wonderful that our words seem inadequate to describe it? Paul might feel a bit like this when he speaks of the boundless, or unsearchable, riches of Christ. He preached the good news of Jesus so that people of all races and nationalities can share, through faith in Christ, in the unfathomable, boundless spiritual riches and wealth God has. These riches includes God's mercy and kindness lavished on us through Jesus by rescuing us from His wrath that we

deserve; His immensely huge love (which we may hear more about next week) which encompasses all Christians from all races, nationalities and backgrounds; and His power giving those who believe new spiritual life.

And this gospel, the good news of the boundless, or the unsearchable, riches of Christ, is what *we've* been given to preach and share with others, so they, too, can have access to God and know Him. This is the wonderful mission of the people of God.

You see, proclaiming the gospel is the way God implements His plan to include many people in the church from all nationalities and backgrounds. It's how the church is formed and grows. It's how more people come to share God's promises and to have access to God.

How can we be specifically encouraged in our mission? There are things here that were true of Paul's very special ministry, but also apply to whatever way we participate in this mission.

In particular, *no Christian should disqualify themselves from taking part in this mission.*

We've already said that our background should not disqualify us from coming to faith in Jesus. Christians should not disqualify themselves from Christian work and ministry.

Did you notice in v8 Paul says that although he *is less than the least of all God's people*, this grace was given him to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ. Even Paul saw himself as less than the least of all God's people. In his case, he knew that before God called him, he was a persecutor of the church. He knew the depth of his sin.

I think some Christians might see themselves as less than the least of all Christians, but then that discourages them from ministry. We may think our background, or sins we've committed in the past before we became Christians, or that we have too much sin generally, disqualifies us from doing much for God. Or we may think we don't have enough Bible knowledge to say much to people. Or we don't have much time, or our health might be not as it was. Or we're very nervous about talking to others about Jesus.

Let's see how God's word helps us. See v7: Paul says, "I became a servant of this gospel by God's *grace* given me through the *working of His power.*"

First, all ministry and God's work we do is a gift of God's grace and kindness

It's true that being a Christian makes a difference in our lives and our lives need to back up what we say. We need to demonstrate to others the grace and kindness God has shown us. But we're not to think we're not holy enough to be able to share with others about Jesus. Jesus' death on the cross has paid the price for all our sin, so we're righteous and clean and holy in God's sight, so we're qualified for ministry. And this means any ministry we do in helping with God's mission is a gift of God's undeserved kindness, His grace.

As I go on in the Christian life, I seem to become more aware of my natural sinfulness, and therefore my need of God's grace. I'm driven more to trust in Jesus death on the cross to pay for my sins, and knowing that the ministry I do is only a gift of God's grace. All ministry is a gift of God's grace – whether, for example, home group leading, preaching, or childrens' work, or sharing the gospel with another person.

Second, God's power enables us to do it. Like me, you may feel weak and nervous about telling others about Jesus. But I know we can be sure God's power will help us take opportunities to say something about Jesus and use what we say because we all, if we're Christians, have the Holy Spirit within us. And there may be occasions when we feel a greater sense of God being with us giving us boldness in a particular situation to be able to say something about Jesus, or we suddenly remember a Bible verse we can share. I have known God's help in these ways. However inadequate we feel, we can trust God to give us the power to help us.

We're not all preachers or evangelists, but if we know Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, we can all participate in God's plan to bring more people to Him. We can all share something about what Jesus has done for us, maybe just a small comment or sentence as an opportunity presents itself, with friends, family colleagues and neighbours, and also whatever our circumstances in life. There is an opportunity to join in at the car wash and stall at St Nicholas shops on Saturday where we hope for opportunities to share with people the good news of Jesus.

Third, more briefly now, the witness

We have been thinking about God's plan to include Gentiles as well as Jews among His people. Paul mentions an important implication of this.

See v10. "His (God's) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms"

This means the church is a witness or a demonstration to the spiritual powers - good ones and also the evil ones - of the beautiful variety, and richly diverse nature of God's wisdom because He created the church community of racial and cultural variety. This is real "diversity" - Bible style! And God sees it's really beautiful, perhaps like the way we see the many coloured beautiful flowers that are on display here in our Flower Festival this weekend.

When the spiritual powers see such a united multi-racial multi-cultural church, they know that God's plan to unite all things in heaven and on earth under Christ, which Paul wrote about in Ephesians Ch 1, will happen. A theologian, F F Bruce, says the church is "God's pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future".

It's exciting that there are people in St Nicholas church family from different nationalities and racial, economic and social backgrounds. But that these differences don't matter anymore, and that our unity is in Christ and the truth of the gospel, as we love meeting together, including with Christians of differing backgrounds, and as we love and forgive each other, these things are a display of the beautiful wisdom of God to the spiritual powers. They'll look at us they'll see that God's plan to unite all things under Christ cannot be stopped.

May I end by mentioning v12, which mentions a blessing of having been brought to know God.: "In Him (that is in Jesus) and by faith in Him we may *approach God with freedom and confidence*"

Freedom: In God's presence, we have freedom of speech. When we pray, we can be honest with God about how we're feeling and what's bothering us. We can be bold before Him. For example, when we pray for more people to trust in Jesus. We don't need to go all formal or religious.

And confidence: we can have confidence in approaching God, because Jesus death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. So we know He loves us. Our confidence before God is not based on how we're doing, our good works or whatever, but on Christ's sacrifice alone.

Let's pray.

