

Ascension (Transferred) – 12 May 2024

Message – A life of service

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, revealed in Christ, give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know you and the hope to which you call us. **Amen.**

Trivial fact for the day, the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, in Greek, is just three sentences. I became aware of this because my Greek tutor gave it to us to translate. We were sure we must have missed a verb somewhere or at least an implied “*to be*”. But no, this is an author, who may or may not be Paul, in full flow providing a challenge to all who would translate the Bible into another language. Of course, the Greek speakers of the day may not have thought of sentences in quite the way we do.

I am at present enjoying seeing how the authors of the lectionary thought the readings each Sunday fit together. Often the key is in the choice of epistle reading. Ephesians starts with a greeting, then a sentence describing how extraordinarily God has blessed us before moving on to express hopes for the Church at Ephesus.

Seeing the evident love of the Ephesian church for God, the author hopes that they will receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that they may grow in understanding, “*with the eyes of your heart enlightened*”.

It is often not apparent to us how much the enlightening of the church continued and the understanding of the life of Christ and the calling of the Church evolved over the first century after Christ’s ascension and the giving of the gift of

the Holy Spirit. Nor perhaps do we recognise the continued evolution and enlightenment, to varying degrees, through every century since. We seem to have got a little stuck after the dramatic change of the reformation and counter-reformation: a period that marked a significant degree of social upheaval and even revolution.

Despite this history, today many have come to look to the church for constancy in a rapidly changing world. In some way, the church has become detached from everyday life. This was not the case in the past. Challenges to the church created waves and even storms in society. There should be constancy in the church, a constant seeking to show love. Constancy should not be confused with stagnation.

The reasons for this change of attitude are debated. The privatisation of faith and Grace Davie's notion of believing without belonging both seem significant. Somehow, faith and attending church became detached. Yet, without being rooted in the church it is very hard for our faith to grow and it is even harder to pass it on to future generations.

Grace Davie's ideas evolved into suggesting that Europe was the exceptional case. While some parts of the world have deeply religious populations, I am not convinced that Europe is as exceptional as Davie suggests. The obvious western exception of North America is starting to show the same trends as Europe. And, there are many other parts of the world which are becoming more secular.

All of this seems a long way from the image of the future the author of the letter to the Ephesians portrays. The first Christians in Ephesus were a tiny religious minority and the

author is reminding them of the wider picture of the power of God over all things and all powers, a power that was at work in Christ and that is at work in the church.

Looking around, there is no obvious power in the church. We seem much like the minority faith group that the Church of Ephesus represented. So, what do the words of the letter writer mean for us, *“may the God of our Lord Jesus Christ... give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your hearts enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.”*

There is a risk we reduce hope to *“pie in the sky when you die.”* It is a caricature of the message of the church and, like all good caricatures, it captures the essence of the message that has been heard from some parts of the church.

Yet, our example is the life of Christ. In the gospel accounts, Christ lived life in all its fullness, engaging fully with every person and situation he encountered. Christ offered, to those who were open to them, the gifts of love and forgiveness, of healing, either physical or spiritual, sometimes both, in short, life in all its fullness. Christ's hope was found in living a life of faithful service to God and neighbour.

This is not the kind of power to which our minds leap when we hear the description of the power of God the writer of Ephesians gave. We need to hold in tension the description in Ephesians and the example of what that looked like lived out in the life of Christ. This is the heart of the mystery of God, God's power, and the incarnation. God does not subjugate us; God offers us perfect freedom.

Real hope is to be found in a life of service. A life of service is the only worthwhile legacy we can leave for generations to come. As we have heard every Sunday in our most celebratory eucharistic thanksgiving, 'I am among you,' Christ said, 'as one who serves.' As we thank God for this remarkable example, we join with the writer of Ephesians in recognising God's extraordinary act of grace. We are set free from sin and simply asked to love and serve God and our neighbour.

In Luke's terms, this is the call to witness. The church is called to be revolutionary, holding on to the radical vision and example of Christ. Christ challenged the powerful wherever that power created injustice. Too often, the Church colludes with those with power. Our power is in service and standing against oppression and subjugation.

Christ welcomed, comforted, and healed the poor, the outcast, and the stranger. Too often the Church has shunned those for whom God has a priority. None of this is easy or convenient. As Christ said, "we need to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves."

So, I hope that we will all join in praying the prayer of the writer of Ephesians for our own church, *God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may you give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know you, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which you have called us.*

Then will God be able to breath life back into the church, and the church will bring life to all, as is our calling.