

PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE EPHESIANS

The Awesome Power of God

Pentecost 10 Year B

2 Sam. 11:1-15; Ps. 14; Eph. 3:14-21; Jn. 6:1-21)

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Many suggest, from time to time, that the church is in a bad way—not just our church but the church in general. Sometimes we wonder if we're going in the right direction and we wonder what we can do, if anything, to help it become more of what God wants it to be. If the church is going to become an example of the will of God for the end of history, then it's going to have to have help. But it won't be us, that helps it on the right course, is has to be God himself. The apostle Paul understood this and in his prayer for the church Ephesus, that was read this morning, he touches on the enormity of the task. But Paul's prayer is not some sort of haphazard wish for what he thinks might be a good thing. The basis of Paul's prayer is not an expression of his own will but an expression of his knowledge of God's purpose.

It follows then that the reason that we are called to pray, is this self-same knowledge of the will of God. In other words, our knowledge of what God has done in Christ, which has been revealed to us, gives us our necessary reason to pray. Our prayer must always be in accordance with the revelation of God's will for the fulfilment of God's will. Consequently, what God gives to us in response to our prayers will be in complete accordance with his purposes for humanity. This is the glory of his radiance and power. How can we know the will of God? Through the Scriptures. How can we enter into God's purpose for the world? Through prayer.

In our passage this morning, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul lists four things that are essential for the ongoing work of the church in the world: inner strength, a foundation of love, knowledge of the love of Christ and spiritual fulfilment. As Paul prays this prayer, he is aware that he is praying to a big God, whose influence as creator extends over the entire cosmos. Paul's prayer is a bit like a staircase by which he climbs higher and higher in his aspiration for his readers. His staircase has four steps, whose key words are: strength, love, knowledge and fullness.

The first thing Paul prays for is that we might have inner strength.

There's a fair bit of concern today, regarding the necessity of regular exercise as part of a normal daily routine. In today's society, where more and more one's style of living is less physical and more cerebral and where the comforts and conveniences of modern society take away from us the need for physical exertion, there is a need to be consciously aware of looking after our bodies through good diet and regular exercise.

Every four years, the world stops to revere the physical prowess of athletes, who spend countless hours beating their bodies into shape, so that they might achieve winning results in their chosen field. But even athletes affirm that the secret of surviving the extreme rigours of physical training lies not in the body but in the mind.

It's the same for Christians if they wish to enjoy true spiritual fulfilment. Physical strength and prowess is not enough. It's no good having a fit body if your mind is fat. As Christians, we may appear strong on the outside, but unless we have inner strength, our resistance to the enemy is futile. True strength is not governed by what's on the outside but by what's on the inside. For Paul such inner strength is seen in the renewing of one's mind.

This is why Paul prays that his readers might have inner strength—an inner strength that can only come by way of the Holy Spirit—the One by whom believers are sealed, as the guarantee of full salvation, and the means by which God is present with the church. What Paul asks for us, the church, then, is that we may be fortified, braced, invigorated, that we may know the strength of the Spirit's inner reinforcement and that we, "by faith" may lay hold ever more firmly of this divine strength—this divine indwelling. *

The second thing that Paul prays for is that we might be grounded in love.

Now, our garden, at the moment is not looking so good. You know that if you want to grow anything significant, you need to do a lot of digging, a lot of fertilising, a lot of watering and all those other things that go towards having a healthy garden. Everyone knows that if you have the right soil, the right amount of water and if all other conditions are favourable, there is every chance that you will be able to grow happy and healthy plants. The secret of a healthy plant is not in the plant itself but in the soil—where all the bacteria and chemicals diligently and silently work away for the benefit of the plant. Of course, if you have the plant in the wrong soil or don't water it or you feed the plant the wrong food, it will wither up and probably die. Well, the same principle applies to the Christian life.

If we were to ask Paul why he prayed that the Spirit of Christ might indwell and strengthen his readers, he might well reply that it is so that they might be able to truly grow in love. In the new and reconciled humanity, which Christ is creating and the Spirit is strengthening, love is the pre-eminent virtue—it's the primary fruit of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. Those who are in Christ are part of God's family, whose members are brothers and sisters, who love their Father and love each other—or at least should do. We need the power of the Holy Spirit and Christ's indwelling to enable us to love each other, especially across the many barriers that we construct between us.

We are to be firmly established—to have deep roots and firm foundations. We are to be like a tree that has roots that penetrate deep into the fertile soil holding it securely. We are to be like a well-built house, strong and steady. In both cases the unseen cause of stability is the same: love. Love is to be the soil in which our lives are to be established and nurtured—love is the foundation upon which our lives are to be built—love for God and love for one another. The psalmist had a good understanding of this concept when in Psalm 1 he states that, those who reject the path of the sinner and, in Paul's terms, whose minds are transformed by the Holy Spirit and who have been established in love, will be like trees that are planted by streams of water, who yield their fruit in its season.

The third thing Paul prays for us, is that we might know Christ's love.

I wonder if you have ever considered how big the universe is. I know that I've spent a lot of time over the years considering the vast expanse of the heavens, of which we know very little. I have an interest in speculating on things unknown in the scientific realm. I have read a number of novels and watched movies that explore some of the vast possibilities of space travel and so on. But stranger than fiction are the textbooks that actually approach the subject from some degree of scientific authenticity. Building on theories from the minds of Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, authors take a look at the physical and not so physical universe that surrounds us, and the relationship between time and space. These books make some fascinating reading. And while you're still grappling with the extent our own known universe, you can become even more confused when you read of multi or parallel universes and the theoretical possibilities of travelling between them.

When we come to trying to understand the love of Christ, we are met with something of the same dilemma. Paul prays that his readers might "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 is, that we might know the love of God in all its dimensions—a love that is broad enough to encompass all humanity, long enough to last through eternity, deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner and high enough to exalt Christ in heaven. This is no mean task.**

And even though we may comprehend the dimensions of Christ's love to some extent with our minds, we cannot fully know it in our experience. Its extent really *is* beyond our human comprehension. Like the universe, it's too broad, too long, too deep and too high for even the church to fully grasp. As Paul says, "it surpasses knowledge". Just as God's grace and God's power surpass our understanding, so too does the love of Christ.

Finally, Paul prays that we might be filled up to the fullness of God.

You have, no doubt, heard of the derogatory term given to a person who thinks of themselves in superior terms. We say that that person is full of him/her self. We all know what that means, even though we might not know the origin of the term. But what does it mean to be filled with the fullness of God?***

Surely, this must point us to our final state of perfection in heaven when together we enter the fullness of God's purpose for us, and are filled to capacity, filled up to that fullness of God which human beings are capable of receiving without ceasing to be human. Another way of expressing it is to say that we shall become like Christ, which is God's purpose and promise to us. The fullness of God, which is best explained as his presence and power, his life and rule, has been mediated to believers through Christ, who is himself the fullness of God. It is this fullness of God that is the goal of our salvation. Once the love of Christ has shown us what God has in store for humanity, the ultimate focus of our attention can be on God himself.

The last part of this passage, which forms Paul's doxology, highlights God's ability to act on behalf of his people. One theologian puts it this way: God is said to be able to do what believers ask in prayer—he is able to do what they might fail to ask but what they can think—he is able to do all they ask or think—he is able to do above all they ask or think—he is able to do abundantly above all they ask or think—he is able to do more abundantly above all they ask or think—he is able to do infinitely more abundantly above all they ask or think. And what is more, this inexpressible power is at work within us! (Lincoln, 216)

It is within the church—the redeemed people of God—that this great power, which is the glory of God, and Christ, who is also the glory of God, is acknowledged. It's acknowledged through its praise and worship and its life of service. It is through Christ that God's power is mediated to us and it is through Christ that our worship and service is offered to God. Paul knows that nothing short of an experience of the greatness of the power of God at work within us and nothing short of a vision of the glory that belongs to God will sustain us in fulfilling the task to which God himself has called us.

"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, forever and ever. Amen." (Eph. 3:20-21)