

Daily Devotions from the URC

Ephesians part 1

10th - 31st August 2018



The Epistle to the Ephesians was universally thought to have been written by the Apostle Paul until the late 18th Century. Opinion is now divided between those who believe that Paul wrote it and those who believe it was written by a disciple of his in his style. The main themes of the letter is casting a model of Church as the body of Christ and urging Christians to recognise the unity that we have due to our relationship with Christ. The final part of the letter gives practical advice on how to live a holy life.

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Friday 10th August Ephesians 1: 1 - 6

*The Revd Michael Hopkins, Minister of Farnham and Elstead URcs,
and Clerk of the General Assembly*

Ephesians 1: 1 - 6

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved

Reflection

Were this series to be called Daily Scholarship it may be interesting to study the much debated question of whether or not Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, but it's Daily Devotions, so that question is for another time and place.

Perhaps you have been on the London Eye? You may well have seen it, or a picture of it. It looks like a giant ferris wheel, rising to 450 feet above the ground. There are thirty-two capsules, each taking up to twenty people. It takes about half an hour to rotate, so slow that it almost looks, from a distance, like it isn't moving. From it, on a clear day, there is an amazing view of all the landmarks and historic buildings and spaces of London (and all the rubbish, too); and the Eye itself is a wonderful view.

The point that I want to make is that the letter to the Ephesians is to the rest of Paul's (we'll call the author that, whoever you think it

was) letters rather like the London Eye is to London. Ephesians is not the longest letter, not the first letter, and nor is it fullest letter, but from the letter to the Ephesians we get an awe-inspiring view of all the features of the letters, all the themes of the earliest Christian tradition in turn: God, Jesus, the Church, the world, salvation, how Christians should behave, and so on.

So, before we travel through this letter in coming days, pause and take stock of the landscape, and as you do ponder a faithful God, a loving heavenly Father, a God who came close to us in Jesus and lifts us closer to himself and adopts us as part of the Christian family. As you ponder these things, hold them before God until you are ready to pray.

Prayer

Loving heavenly Father, ever-living source of all that is good, keep me faithful in serving you.
Help me to drink of Christ's truth, and fill my heart with his love so that I may serve you in faith and love and reach eternal life. Keep me in your presence. Let me never be separated from you, and help me to do your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Saturday 11th August St Clare of Assisi](#)

Francis Brienen, Deputy General Secretary (Mission), United Reformed Church

Born in 1193 in Assisi of a wealthy family, Clare caught the joy of a new vision of the gospel from Francis' preaching. Escaping from home, first to the Benedictines and then to a Béguine-style group, she chose a contemplative way of life when she founded her own community, which lived in corporate poverty understood as dependence on God, with a fresh, democratic lifestyle. Clare became the first woman to write a religious Rule for women, and in it

Some preach against it: the writer was wrong just as we sometimes get it wrong; the way this text has been used to oppress just proves the point. Others try and look at the writer's context and say it is so different to our own that we can't take anything from the passage - he may have been right then but he's not right now. Others still see this passage as having divine origin and words of divine truth and would wish to uphold the literal truth of the passage. All these approaches have their merits and problems.

I think, however, it's a passage we have to wrestle with - there are plenty of those in the Scriptures after all. There is a truth in being subject to each other - responsible to each other for our journeys of discipleship. There is a truth in that our marriages (which may be rather more complex than in the writer's time - my own, for example, may not have been approved of by the writer) need to reflect God's love poured out in Christ. There is a truth in seeing the relationship between Christ and the Church as being as sacred, strong and intimate as the marital bond.

Maybe we have to struggle to separate out timeless truths in the passage from problematic patriarchal pronouncements recognising the harm that these have caused. Of course this approach is no easier than the others outlined above but I think God wants us to wrestle with difficult passages, and difficult questions so that we are both changed and challenged.

Prayer

Lord of the Church remind us of the bond you have with us, as close as the marital bond, as fierce as a husband's love, or a wife's fierce tenderness. Open our hearts and minds, so that when we struggle with Biblical passages, you meet us in that struggle, and strengthen our faith. Amen.

Friday 31st August Ephesians 5: 22 - 33

The Rev'd Andy Braunston, Minister of Barrhead, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs in the Synod of Scotland

Reading

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the Church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the Church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the Church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Reflection

This passage leaves us scratching our heads due to the content and the way the it has been used over the centuries. Of course the injunctions to husbands were never preached on as much as those to wives, the context of ancient Rome, with its brutal patriarchy and slavery based economy (more disturbing passages there!), is different to our own, but what does one do with this passage?

showed great liberty of spirit in dealing with earlier prescriptions. During the long years after Francis' death, she supported his earlier companions in their desire to remain faithful to his vision, as she did. Some of her last words were: "Blessèd be God, for having created me."

2 Corinthians 4. 6-10

It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Reflection

How do you respond to adversity? Are you one of these people who take whatever life throws at them on the chin? Or are you, what our culture scathingly calls, a bit of a snowflake: do you melt at the least bit of heat? My guess is that often we find ourselves somewhere in between or wavering from one to the other.

Perhaps Paul did too. He knew a thing or two about the hard knocks of life. In his second letter to the Corinthians he lays it all out. He has endured overwork, imprisonment, flogging, stoning, getting lost at sea, dangers everywhere and from anyone, hunger, sleeplessness, cold, anxiety and threat of death (ch. 11). He tells the Corinthians this because they too have treated him badly. Having visited there to address false apostles, he finds himself rejected and publicly humiliated. His visit ends in failure. And so he writes to them to tell

them about all he has suffered but also to let them know that he is not broken by it.

Clare of Assisi, whose saint's day it is today, likewise was no stranger to suffering. Living a life of contemplation and prayer, she chose poverty and service to others, at great personal cost. For the last 27 years of her life, she suffered ill health. And yet, in all of it she kept her resolve and blessed God.

As did Paul. We are afflicted in every way, he said, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Both Paul and Clare of Assisi knew that it was by the grace of God that they could endure whatever came their way. Through their vulnerability God's light, love and mercy could shine.

Prayer

Loving God,
whatever comes my way today,
may I not lose heart.
When I feel afflicted, perplexed,
persecuted or struck down,
may I too know myself
loved, cherished and held by you,
so that through me
your light may shine
and Christ's life be made visible.
Amen

But I have to wonder about Paul in this passage. What if there were no prison chaplains or others to step beyond the perimeter fence to engage with the people who find themselves behind bars? I am very reluctant to say 'step into the darkness' because in my time as a prison chaplain I have seen a lot of light in prison, as well as many who are in the darkness of despair and hopelessness. However. Paul talks elsewhere about being 'ambassadors for Christ'. As ever, Paul is speaking into a particular context in this passage. Chaplains – of whatever sort (hospital, industrial etc) are precisely that, people of faith – here I include my fellow Muslim, Sikh, Jewish etc. colleagues as well – who go to where people are and remind them that where they are right now need not be where they are tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that.

But we also are reminded of the Church who decided to employ this ex-offender on his release. They had woken up to the possibility of helping people back into society and into Church-life on release. Could your church community do the same?

Prayer

'When I was in prison you visited me' says Jesus to the sheep.

Loving God today we pray for all those in the criminal justice system. Those who work and those who are imprisoned. We pray for the victims of crime and their families and friends.

We ask that you will be in all the dark places of our world and that there may be ambassadors of light and hope to make your presence clear.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

Thursday 30th August Ephesians 5: 6 - 14

*The Rev'd Hilary Collinson is a minister in the Tees and Swale
Pastorate*

Reading

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light - for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

'Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.'

Reflection

A prisoner once told me that the day he became a Christian was 'the best day of my life but also the worst'. He had spent seven years in prison before he came to faith and thought of it as 'part of what happens in my line'. When he became a Christian he told me 'I understood all the pain and hurt I had caused others, that will never go away now, but I also know that I can lead a different life'. Now he was approaching the end of his time in prison, seven years on in his faith, he was given an opportunity to become a chef in a Church café on release. In many ways he could be described as someone who had woken up to things and would not go back to sleep.

Sunday 12th August Psalm 59

The Rev'd Viv Henderson is a mental health chaplain in Somerset

1 From foes and all who threaten me,
O God, be my defence.

2 Save me from evildoers' hands
and men of violence.

3 See how they lie in wait for me!
Ferocious men combine
Against me, LORD, for no offence
or sinful deed of mine.

4 I have not done them any wrong,
yet they prepare to fight.
Arise to help me in my need;
take notice of my plight.

5 LORD God Almighty, rouse yourself;
come, God of Israel,
To judge the nations, and spare none
who wickedly rebel.

6 At evening they return again;
they snarl like dogs at bay.
They prowl about the city gates,
still hungry for their prey.

7 See what they spew out from their mouths!
Look! from their lips come swords!
With evil mind they laugh and say,
"Who now can hear our words?"

8 But you, O LORD, will laugh at them;
those nations you deride.

9 I watch for you, my loving God,
my Strength, in whom I hide.

10 My God will come and give me help;
in triumph I will sing
Before all those who slander me,
O Lord, our shield and king.

11 But lest my people should forget,
slay not my foes outright.
Cause them to wander aimlessly;
defeat them by your might.

12 Reward the evil of their lips,
the words of their own mouths;
Let them be captured by their pride,
their curses and untruths.

13 Consume them till they are no more;
in anger lay them low.
That God rules over Israel
all distant lands will know.

14 At evening they return again;
like dogs they snarl and growl.
15 They roam about the town for food
and, finding none, they howl.

16 But in the morning I will praise
your strength and loving care,
Because you are my strong defence,
my refuge from despair.

17 O God, you are my only strength;
to you I will sing praise.

place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Reflection

It's fair to say the reason I chose this reading today, isn't because I love it, it certainly doesn't rank as one of my all-time favourite scripture! Rather, it's because I signed up late and it was one of the very few 'left-overs'. It isn't a passage, I've ever preached on without its surrounding, more encouraging context, when we are called 'light of the Lord' and exhorted to 'Be filled with the Spirit'. It would be lovely, if we could extract the difficult bits, from the Bible. To have 'light' without 'darkness', 'fragrant offerings', without 'sacrifice'. But it isn't an option and light reveals shadows.

Paul refers to these shadows, the 'unspeakable, that must not even be mentioned among you'. 'Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them, for everything exposed by the light becomes visible'. Ephesians 5:11-12.

We may have shadows, needing to be brought into the light, confessed to God, for his mercy and forgiveness. But, urges Paul, don't forget in all things thanksgiving.

Prayer

Sorry Lord for the times I've been selective about your Word, seeking comfort not challenge. Help me to engage with your word, even when it means revealing the shadows in my life. Transform me, by the power of your Holy Spirit and equip me, to be an instrument of praise, giving glory to you. Amen.

in miniature versions of adult clothing and here, in South East Northumberland, boys typically followed their dads down the pit until the 1980s.

Today, we perceive teenage rebellion as a cultural norm - a rite of passage - with some parents becoming worried if their youngster doesn't wear questionable clothes or have appalling taste in music. Focusing on the ways that generations differ, we ignore all that we have in common until, that is, the day when we hear ourselves saying one of our parents' catchphrases and discover that we too have unconsciously become replicas of what went before.

If it requires no effort - or even will - to become like somebody we haven't chosen as a role model, why is it so difficult to imitate God as today's passage requires? Sadly, it goes against the standards and customs of our place and time to give as freely as Christ. In fact, if there is one thing our capitalist society is firmly against, it is giving something for nothing. So much so that we are even afraid of getting something for nothing and most people look for a catch when unexpected generosity occurs. Perhaps, then, a first step to giving as freely as God is to learn to receive freely, simply saying "thank you".

Beloved Father, help us to receive gratefully allowing others the pleasure of offering us their love and care. Let us learn how to emulate your generosity through example and make our lives a fragrant offering and sacrifice to the Christian doctrine of love. Amen.

[Wednesday 29th August Ephesians 5: 3 - 5](#)

The Rev'd Sally Willett, Minister of West Thamesmead Community Church and Evangelism and Renewal Advocate for the Group for Evangelism and Renewal in the URC.

But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. Entirely out of

You are my fortress and my rock,
my loving God always.

Reflection

Psalm 59 is a miktam, one of six to have this label. No one is quite sure what miktam means, but all six of these Psalms are Psalms of lament attributed to David; four of them refer to David's struggles with enemies.

Psalm 59 is ascribed to David about the time that Saul sent men to watch David's house in order to kill him. (1 Samuel 19.11ff)

David was having a difficult time going from having been part of royal court and friend of Saul's son, to be on the run, living in fear of being killed. His vocation to be king had been revealed by Samuel yet here he was still waiting for his time to come.

In these words he appeals to God for protection - ultimately he will become king of his persecutors but the memory of this time will be forgotten if they are killed. David wants them to be around so their current action can be proved wrong. He wants to be vindicated in sight of enemies at home and before other nations.

The description of his plight is interspersed with bursts of praise in verses 9-10 and 17, where he speaks of God as tower, shield and refuge (NIV). In the face of danger he longs for God to act and affirms God as his fortress three times.

This is a song of struggle, of hope against the odds, of faithful praise when almost overwhelmed by fear and bitterness of his current situation.

Hymns based on this psalm are often sung in Remembrance-tide e.g. O God our hope in ages past.

Prayer

Thank you Lord that even in the darkest days
you are my shield, my fortress and my refuge.
Thank you Lord that in your service
you turn every circumstance to your advantage.
Forgive us when we doubt your power to deliver and protect us.
Forgive us when we doubt your wisdom and power
to bring peace out of chaos.
Teach our hearts to sing your praises like David
when life is dark & bleak.
Keep us safe till morning comes and your glory is revealed. Amen

[Monday 13th August Ephesians 1: 7-12](#)

The Rev'd John Proctor worships in Cambridge, and serves as General Secretary of the URC

Reading:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

Reflection

Perhaps it is fitting that I wrote these reflections on Trinity Sunday. The long opening blessing of Ephesians focuses on the three persons

them being maltreated. Some time ago, a Muslim friend of mine presented me with a sobering thought. "You see Christians around the world being persecuted, tortured and murdered why are you not angry? When we see our Muslim sisters and brothers being hurt we get angry." Let me finish with a couple of sentences from William Barclay's commentary: 'The anger which is selfish and uncontrolled is a sinful and hurtful thing, which must be banished from the Christian life. But the selfless anger which is disciplined into the service of Christ and our fellow [women and] men is one of the great dynamic forces of the world.' Amen

Prayer

Lord, I pray that you will give us all the wisdom, courage and stamina to live our lives in the light of your example. Enable us to forget self when we are tempted to become angry because someone has hurt us. Help us to channel our anger towards those who deprive our neighbours of your great blessings and freedoms. Amen.

[Tuesday 28th August Ephesians 5: 1 - 2](#)

Helen Wilson, Local Preacher, South East Northumberland Ecumenical Area.

Reading

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Reflection

There is a suggestion, here, that we have a duty to emulate our parents. As strange as that may sound now, it is only a couple of generations since children routinely lived lives indistinguishable from those of their mothers, fathers, or other caregivers. Children dressed

Monday 27th August Ephesians 4: 25 - 32

Alan Yates, Immediate Past Moderator of General Assembly

Reading

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Reflection

I have to admit I don't always find Paul easy to understand, but this passage is really clear. Maybe, because in this, his most impersonal of letters, he is being careful to give guidance that is more general and not tightly engineered for a particular group to meet a particular need. Whatever the reason, we see a clear list of things that a disciple of Christ should do and not do. In simple terms, this is an explanation of what it means to love your neighbour as yourself. It is quite a test to mark ourselves against this standard!

There is, perhaps, one small exception to the clarity. In verse 26 we are asked to be angry, but not in a sinful way. At first sight this is a strange request, but it won't take you long to list a few times where Christ's anger was recorded in the Bible; and this is our guide to non-sinful anger – Jesus was angry on behalf of others, when he saw

of the Trinity, one after another. It starts with the heavenly purpose of God, stretching forward from the dawn of time (1:3-6). It ends with the Church's experience of the Spirit, pointing towards greater glory ahead (1:13-14). And this middle section (1:7-12) is the centre and heartbeat of the whole. It's about Jesus Christ, who anchored God's work in the life of earth. 'In Christ' – either explicitly stated, or implied by the words 'in him' – are rich blessings and mighty deeds of goodness.

In Christ, God's people have forgiveness, 'through his blood'. The cross is a place of grace and gift, enabling Christians to live in freedom, confidence and pardon, rather than in the misery and mess of our own selfishness and mistakes.

In Christ, God's pleasure and plan are declared to the world and set into action, and in Christ the full story of time will be brought together, in wholeness and joy.

In Christ, the Church travels in a mood of hope and promise, secure in the knowledge that the life we now share with Christ will grow into glory and will last in love.

Christ is the pivot around which God's eternal purpose finds grip and power in this world of time and touch. Christ is the lens through which we see the reality of God in the story of earth. Christ is the partner in whom we link arms with the majesty and mercy of heaven. Christ is the presence who brings the life of God into our living, and the pilot who steers our journey home, into the life of God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, lover and Lord and life-giver,
the dirt and pain of your cross pardon our sin and shame,
the life of your resurrection quickens our pilgrim journey,

the hope of your kingdom beckons our desire and delight.
In you we live and move,
in you we rejoice and trust,
to you we look and on you we depend.
Praise and glory be to you, now and always. Amen.

[Tuesday 14th August Ephesians 1:13-14](#)

The Rev'd D. Gillian Poucher is the minister of Gainsborough United Reformed Church, Lincolnshire

Reading:

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Reflection

It's astonishing how much richness and depth can be found in a mere two verses of scripture. Here the writer of Ephesians, (most probably not Paul), packs in an array of scriptural and material allusions to offer us tremendous reassurance and an immense challenge.

Scripturally, reference to 'the promised Holy Spirit' takes us back to the final night of Jesus' earthly life when he comforted the disciples by promising the Holy Spirit would come to them following his departure (John 14:16-17; 16:12). We are reassured by the knowledge that having responded positively to the good news, the presence of the Spirit in our lives is the sign of God's possession of us, the 'seal.'

Materially, the language of 'seal', 'pledge', 'inheritance' and 'redemption' provides us with a vivid image from the financial world

Although Maslow's methodology and conclusions have been criticised (and indeed he himself continued to refine his theory over time), in broad terms this is an idea that seems to make sense, and to resonate in our experience: when we're deprived of food or physical warmth, for example, we'll worry more about meeting these needs than about adding to the books on our shelves.

There's a trace of this, in miniature, in today's Psalm: the general progression from desperate plea towards confident praise, and the particular progression in the detail of what the Psalmist is seeking. First comes the cry to "conduct me to the rock that's higher far than I" - to be brought simply to a place of physical preservation from surrounding danger. Then, the request to "dwell within your tent" - to enjoy the comfort and hospitality that can be found in an offer of sanctuary. Yet once this is in place, the very next phrase reveals a yearning for an even closer intimacy: "O for the shelter of your wings", a feeling of being held close within the presence and protection of God.

We, and the people among whom we serve, may each be at different places on the journey – at different points on a pyramid of personal needs and concerns. So in our worship, work, and witness, in aspiring towards spiritually mature and cohesive communities, let us not overlook the more fundamental needs close-at-hand: shelter, food, and a place of safety.

Prayer

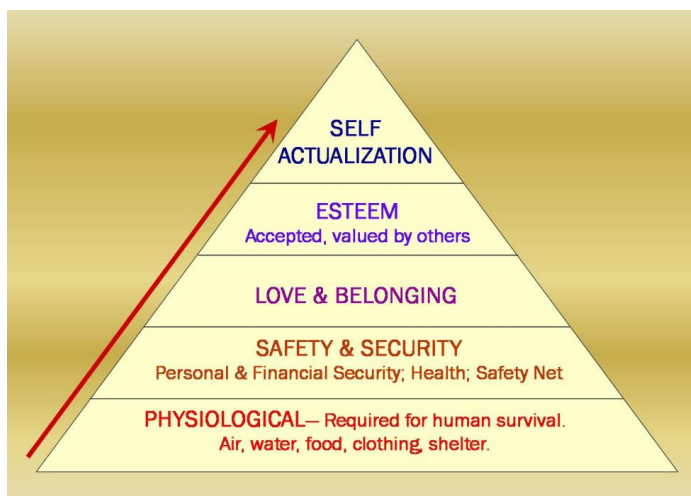
Our Father in heaven, your name be praised, your kingdom come, and earth and heaven enact your will.
Give us the food we need this day...(and when hunger is assuaged:)
bring release from guilt and from debt... (& when freedom is known:)
keep us from being put to the test, and rescue us from evil.
For you rule, God, eternally, and the power and the glory are yours.
Amen.

7 May he for ever sit as king
enthroned before God's face;
Appoint your love and faithfulness
as his protecting grace.

8 Then will I ever bless your name
with songs of joy and praise,
And will fulfil my holy vows
with care throughout my days.

Reflection

Writing around the middle of the 20th Century, the psychologist Abraham Maslow outlined what he called a "hierarchy of needs". He suggested that human needs and motivations can be portrayed as a kind of pyramid, with the most basic and fundamental requirements for survival at the bottom, and the more esoteric and aspirational goals further up; at the top of the pyramid is "self-actualization", meaning a person's desire to fulfil her or his own potential.



of the process of salvation. Faith in Christ leads to the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, the 'pledge' or down payment of our eternal inheritance. The sense of 'now but not yet' is clear: redemption, when God takes full possession, lies in the future.

The challenge concerns our response. The initial choice, in verse 13, is whether we respond to the 'word of truth' in faith. The ongoing choice is whether we will keep on responding positively and continue to walk in step with the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

God our Creator,
Thank you for calling us to be your people.
Christ our Redeemer,
Forgive us when we falter.
Spirit our Sustainer,
Inspire us to persevere.
So may our lives be lived to the glory of God
today, tomorrow and evermore. Amen.

[Wednesday 15th August Ephesians 1: 15 - 23](#)

The Rev'd Ruth Watson is the minister of Worsley Road and Patricroft URCs in Salford.

Reading

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us

who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Reflection

The first verse of this passage has special resonance for me as it was written in my Bible by a friend at University when I was leaving. So often we concentrate on the “conversion” of non-believers, or the criticism of those who are not following the way as well as they should, that sometimes we forget to praise those who are doing well. Paul criticises many for their lack of faith, or their failure of duty, or their selfishness, so here it is refreshing to read that he thanks God for the people of Ephesus who are faithful in their duties and asks for God’s wisdom for them. May we remember to encourage those who are faithful on their journey that we may build up our community of faith to support each other as we learn to follow Christ.

Prayer

Father God, so often we bring our “shopping list” of needs we forget to thank you for all our gifts. So let us take time now to say thank you for all we receive from you....

Lord Jesus, so often we criticise others for how they are Not like you, so let us take time now to remind ourselves of all those who Are like you, who inspire us to be more like you ourselves.....

Holy Spirit, inspire us so that we can recognise the good in others, the faithfulness in others, and be so moved to be faithful ourselves..... Amen

Prayer

Lord,
Preserve us from being hard-hearted and bigoted. In our lives we should reflect the likeness of Jesus to those around us. Help us to do this and keep our minds in the love and knowledge of him and his teachings. Amen

Sunday 26th August Psalm 61

The Rev'd Dominic Grant, Minister, Trinity URC Wimbledon

1 O hear my urgent cry, my God,
and listen to my plea.
2 From earth’s remotest bounds I call
when my heart faints in me.

O God, conduct me to the rock
that’s higher far than I.
3 For you’re my refuge from the foe,
my tower of strength on high.

4 O let me dwell within your tent,
for ever there to live!
O for the shelter of your wings,
the refuge which they give!

5 For you have heard my vows, O God,
and you have given me
The heritage of those who fear
your name continually.

6 Prolong the days the king will live;
his sovereign rule extend
For many generations more,
established without end.

Reflection

It would be very interesting to hear how Paul preached to a new set of people. We know he preached the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but did he also tell them the stories of Jesus' actions and words which we presume he heard from those who had met Jesus in human flesh?

Here in his letter to the Ephesians, he seems unsure of what they have learned because they do not seem to have learned anything from Jesus' teachings, or at least, not enough to have changed their lives completely. They have not had a complete change of heart and mind which surely should show in the way they live their lives. Their hearts are hard; they enjoy the things of the body far too much, in fact they are behaving like those around them who have not heard of Jesus.

Paul is saying here that it takes a complete new mindset to follow the way of Christ and a change of heart. It's an interesting thought that the two are separate; you would think that one would change the other and this is what Paul seems to say. Hardness of heart has made Gentiles ignorant, literally, "not knowing". Presumably he is using the word "gentile" to mean those who have not received the good news, rather than those who are not Jews.

What would Paul think of us today? I hope he would not find us hard-hearted and callous. I hope he would see the love in our churches which should be the fruit of the knowledge we have of Jesus, rather than ignorance of him. Perhaps as a precaution, we should look back at the teaching about Jesus we have received and measure ourselves up to it. See if the new body is better than the old!

Thursday 16th August Ephesians 2: 1-10

The Rev'd Gethin Rhys is National Assembly Policy Officer for Cytun (Churches Together in Wales) and a member of Parkminster URC, Cardiff.

Reading

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Reflection

Last year we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This passage is a key Reformed text – "by grace you have been saved through faith". Lengthy tomes have been written on the meaning of the key terms in the phrase in English and the Greek original.

The trouble is, as anyone who speaks more than one language will know, that even more difficult than translating and explaining conceptual words such as 'grace', 'save' or 'faith' is translating the small words – 'by' and 'through' – each language uses them

differently. As it stands in the NRSV, our salvation is achieved by grace – it's God's doing – and conveyed to us through faith. The English sounds very different if you say swap them round and say "through grace you have been saved by faith". This would mean that the salvation is achieved by faith – it's my doing – and conveyed to me through grace.

Paul is aware of the danger of misunderstanding here as he dictates (he spoke at least two languages, remember, and probably more), so he adds – "this is not your own doing – it is the gift of God". How odd then that so many Reformation celebrations said that Luther had discovered – via Paul - that we were saved "by faith alone," and some wrote hymns to that effect.

I am neither Biblical scholar nor theological historian. For what it's worth, I don't think that Luther believed we are saved BY faith. It would have made ecumenical discussions so much easier if others had not imputed this belief to him. It would also have avoided much guilt amongst Protestants who came to attribute all kinds of ills to their own lack of faith – the lack of salvation, or assurance of it, was their fault. All because of one little word.

Prayer

Loving God,
I worry that I don't believe enough
or I don't believe the right things
or I don't have faith enough to move mountains
or that my mustard seed of faith has got lost.
Help me to hear Paul's words afresh,
to know that my salvation is wrought not by my faith, but by your
grace
and so depends not on my feeble efforts or my fickle understanding
but on your unchanging love. Amen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, teacher and friend, you are with us when we take our first steps in the discoveries of life. And you are in our last steps, however faltering they may be. Bless those near the beginning of their journey. Strengthen those who have come a long way. And cherish those whose steps of life have all been trodden.

Help us to encourage one another as we travel and to know that although it seems as if we are forever learning and forever making mistakes, there is nowhere we can go where your love will not surround us and no mistake that can separate us from you, not in life, not in death, not ever. For you are our gracious Redeemer, not our menacing judge. Amen.

Saturday 25th August [Ephesians 4: 17-24](#)

Chris Eddowes, Elder and lay preacher, St. George's URC Hartlepool

Reading

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!-- assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Friday 24th August Ephesians 4: 14 - 16

*The Rev'd Michael Hopkins, Minister of Farnham and Elstead URCS,
and Clerk of the General Assembly.*

Reading

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Reflection

"Grow up!", or more often, "act your age, not your shoe size!" were things that I remember hearing said in school (not always directed at me!), and I think this is what Paul (I know that is a matter of debate) is getting at in this passage. "Craftiness in deceitful scheming" sounds very deliberate, but the preceding metaphors are rather haphazard. A boat without a rudder goes where the wind and waves takes it, a game of dice depends upon luck, and many children (and some adults) believe everything they are told without question. Paul is suggesting that mature Christians would be well advised to develop discernment and wisdom, and that this goes on throughout life.

When children literally grow up, they become more and more distinct as their bodies, personalities, and souls all develop and grow. But the metaphorical process of growing up spiritually is the opposite, because spiritual maturity comes as Christians grow closer together in love and in relationship with Christ. How do we go about this? What does this mean for us, wherever we are on our journey through life and our journey with God?

Friday 17th August Ephesians 2: 11 - 21

*Liz Kam is the Church Related Community Worker at Levenshulme
Inspire*

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' - a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands - remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Reflection

I love reading the letters of the Apostles, not least for the scope they have for the imagination...what on earth was going on behind the scenes? Scholars can help us answer such questions, but we can also look to our own experience.

We've all been part of a group of some sort in our lives. We know how easy it is to rub each other up the wrong way.

But the early Church really had some issues to contend with; somehow the Gentiles had to unite with the Jews, once proudly separated from each other by strict rules and laws, never mind language and culture, they now had to be family.

It sounds so simple doesn't it? "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the Saints and also members of the household of God..." I wonder if it really felt like that, either to the Gentiles or the Jews. The rest of the letter implies that the Gentiles needed some reminding about their new life in Christ and their responsibilities within it. Was it easier to offer advice to the Gentiles on how to tow the line than it was to listen to them and be truly inclusive?

Have we become a church defined by 'the way we do things here'? Pioneer ministers and Church Related Community Workers have built up a wealth of experience working with those 'outside' the Church and know that the phrase 'You are welcome here' is often made up of hollow words. Simply stating it is not enough.

What humility, faith and courage it must have taken in the early Church, to come together and to grow. In order to be the Jesus shaped Church we are called to be, we must be prepared to acknowledge and celebrate God's work outside the Church. Do we too have the humility, faith and courage to listen and learn, and be changed by what we hear?

Prayer

God of Grace,

Let me seek you in the other,

Here are some suggestions for meditating on those paragraphs from the Basis of Union together with today's verses from Ephesians:

- a) Visualise and think about the components of ministerial service listed.
- b) What are the gifts and opportunities given to each person in your situation?
- c) How are you all opening yourselves to being further equipped?
- d) Who is being called to new areas of service?
- e) What is the aim or purpose of all this, in relation to Christ?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,

Thank you for your gifts of grace,
in and through the Church,
for the world.

Help us to fulfil our parts
in your ministry
together.

And to you be the glory,
to all generations,
for ever.

Amen.

might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Reflection

Ephesians 4:7-13 is basic to what our Basis of Union (our constitution written at the formation of the URC in 1972) says about the ministry of the whole people of God, and about particular ministries to equip us all for this service.

You may find it helpful to look at that again now, while seeking to understand more of what God expects of us when walking the way: living the life of Jesus today.

19. The Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it. This service is given by worship, prayer, proclamation of the Gospel, and Christian witness; by mutual and outgoing care and responsibility; and by obedient discipleship in the whole of daily life, according to the gifts and opportunities given to each one. The preparation and strengthening of its members for such ministry and discipleship shall always be a major concern of the United Reformed Church.

20. For the equipment of his people for this total ministry the Lord Jesus Christ gives particular gifts for particular ministries and calls some of his servants to exercise them in offices duly recognised within his Church.

Different and strange, but full of you.

Give me the humility to set down my culture,
To weed out that which isn't Christ shaped,
And to listen and learn more of you.

Give me the faith to trust in your guidance,
To believe that you call me by name,
And to seek ways to serve you.

Give me the courage to adventure into new territory,
To challenge others to join me,
And to act on what I learn.

Amen

[Saturday 18th August Ephesians 3: 1 - 6](#)

The Rev'd Stewart Cutler is Minister, St Ninian's, Stonehouse LEP

Reading:

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - 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.

Reflection

We don't often think of Paul as a Mystic. He gets accused of being many things, but not often that. And yet here he is inviting us into the mystery that is Christ... The Reformers loved Paul because he seems so keen on doctrine and rules and order but at the heart of Paul's message to the new church is the idea of mystery.

Mystery requires something of us. It needs us to be open, adventurous, creative and trusting. It demands more than a little courage because to step into a mystery is, by very definition, to step into something unknown and into something that doesn't follow the normal rules and patterns.

Grace, the gift Paul to his readers, is one of those mysterious things that doesn't follow our rational, enlightenment way of thinking. Sharing in one body, all heirs of the kingdom, doesn't make any sense in a world ruled by a military empire, but that is exactly the mysterious promise we are invited into, to step out of the way of the world and into the mystery of God.

Prayer

Mysterious God

Beyond all knowing

And yet known in Jesus,

Beyond all our rules and doctrines

And yet willing us into relationship,

Beyond our boundaries and borders

And yet as close to us as our breath,

Help us step beyond the comfortable and familiar

Into the expanse of your infinite love.

Amen

So how does this play out in the life of the Church today? At times it seems that we are further than ever from realising the vision that Paul had for the Church – although I hope this isn't true. As the United Reformed Church we know only too well the effort it takes to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. But Paul speaks to us as individuals too. He urges us to have the grace to recognise Christ in others, and with the Spirit's help, so treat them as though each were part of us – which, of course, they are.

Prayer

Holy God, undivided Trinity,

who is above all and through all and in all.

In the diversity of life and the complexities of living

Help us, as your chosen people, to live in unity with one another

And by doing so, bring glory to your name,

For the sake of Christ our Lord and Head. Amen

Thursday 23rd August [Ephesians 4: 7 - 13](#)

The Rev'd Bernie Collins is a member of Avenue St Andrew's URC, Southampton, Convenor of URC Mission Committee and a retired minister.

Reading

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people.'

(When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he

Wednesday 22nd August Ephesians 4: 1-6

The Rev'd David Salisbury is minister of Dyserth and Holywell and Training & Development Officer in the National Synod of Wales

Reading

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the 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 all.

Reflection

Mission statements are as popular as ever – and that's no bad thing. Being able to sum up, in one or two sentences, who we are and what we are about helps us to keep focus and gives people a sense that everyone is pulling in the same direction. However, I don't know of any church's mission statement that says, 'As God's beloved children we will make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace', yet for Paul this was one of the most important things that members of Christ's body should strive for.

It would seem, from the language Paul uses, that he was also fully aware of how difficult this is. He pleads with the church to make every effort, and to do so with humility, gentleness and patience – to bear one another in love. And why? Because of our oneness in Christ. In verses 4 – 6 he uses the word 'one' seven times – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. This says to me that Paul cannot stress enough how important one-ness is for those who are one in Christ.

Sunday 19th August Psalm 60

The Rev'd John Proctor, General Secretary of the URC, worships in Cambridge

1 You, O God, have overthrown us
and have cast us clean away.
You have dealt with us in anger;
now restore us, Lord, we pray.

2 You have torn the land asunder;
you have made the land to shake.
O come down and mend its fractures,
for you caused the earth to quake.

3 You have made your people suffer
times of need and helplessness,
And the wine that you have given
makes us stagger in distress.

4 But for those who truly fear you,
look! your banner is unfurled,
Which in face of the aggressor
has been shown to all the world.

5 With your right hand save and help us;
rescue all those whom you love.

6 God has spoken from his temple,
from his holy place above:

"I will distribute in triumph
every part of Shechem's land,
And the whole of Succoth valley
I will measure with my hand.

7 "Mine is Gilead, mine Manasseh,

Ephraim is my helmet true;
Judah I will make my sceptre
8 and on Edom toss my shoe.

“Moab will become my servant,
and upon Philistia’s shore
I will shout aloud in triumph;
I am Lord and conqueror.”

9 Who will bring me to the city
that is strongly fortified,
And to reach the land of Edom
who will be my help and guide?

10 Have you not, O God, rejected,
turned us over to our foe?
When our armies go to battle,
with them you no longer go.

11 Since all human help is worthless,
12 God will give us victory;
He it is who will defend us
and tread down our enemy.

Reflection

Psalms 60 is about a mismatch between hope and experience. The background is the theology of holy war. In Old Testament times much of the Middle East was contested territory. The people of Israel believed that God would fight for them. They had an edge over their enemies when they joined battle. That was the hope.

The experience was not always so tidy. On this occasion there had been panic, misery and defeat. What had gone wrong? Might God

However, Paul readily acknowledges that this has only been possible due to the Heavenly Father enabling him to partake in the riches of His glory. It is this as well as being endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit, which gives him the abilities to enable him to fulfil his God-given ministry.

In essence Paul is longing that all may be given the spiritual understanding to know unreservedly a love such as this for themselves. He is mindful of the fact that he, as much as anyone, needs that fullness which he commends to his readers.

So filled is he with humble adoration and appreciation that he can only do one thing and that is, bow his knees willingly to the One who has made all of this possible.

The final two verses are a reminder of what he knows so well. This is that it is only through the Lord being at work in each one of us who can accomplish such, bringing us to that fulfilment of knowing the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. What confidence and assurance these words give us as we seek to be faithful ourselves wherever the Lord has placed us to serve Him.

Prayer

God of extreme and lavish love,
we fall in wonder on our knees,
to bask in your presence
and to experience even more
of the love that you offer to each one of us.
Teach us the lesson of humility,
that we can only serve you completely,
if we open ourselves to your divine love
and receive from you the love that knows no limits.
In Jesus’ name and for his glory alone.
Amen.

to toil and not to seek for rest;
to labour and not to ask for any reward;
except that of knowing that we do thy will. Amen.

Tuesday 21st August Ephesians 3: 14 - 21

Verena Walder Lay Preacher and Elder; Tabernacle, Mumbles.

Reading

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 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.

Reflection

These well known, and loved, words seem to almost act as a doxology or closing point at this juncture of Paul's epistle to the Ephesian Church. However, it is anything than that; there is quite a chunk of solid teaching to follow. Here Paul is pouring out his gratitude to the Lord regarding the ministry which God has given him and his overwhelming commitment to the task in hand. Throughout it all it is clear to see just how he longs for all the believers there to experience the love of God not in little, rationed, portions but in its entirety. Paul knows that he has been transformed by God's love and wants everyone to similarly experience and enter into such a great love for themselves.

have checked out? Or were the promises still live? 'We trusted God and it went wrong. Can we still trust?'

So this Psalm is a tussle, a counterpoint, between faith and failure. The verses move from despair (1-3) to confidence (4-8). Then just as it seems that hope has won the day, alarm and concern step back in. The fearful word 'rejected' (10) directly echoes 'cast away' (1). So when the Psalm eventually ends on a firm upbeat (12), we have already felt the rise and fall of the tune. Now we know that faith cannot be monotone. Trust means dependence rather than complacency, assurance not insurance, a deep sureness but no easy certainty.

Two reflections. First, there is no simple translation of the Old Testament theology of battle into modern wars. Both sides in the First World War said, 'God is for us,' and four years of blood and a hundred of grief suggest that both were wrong. Even when war seems necessary, it is hardly godly. Second, this Psalm speaks into the times when each of us has to face our failures. The message is that God is there, working the situation through with us. Faith will not always deliver success. But God sticks around, through the bad times too, and God will always help us to go forward.

Prayer

God of sunshine and shadow,
companion of our successes,
comforter of our sorrows,
we pray for ourselves
in days of failure and fear,
and we pray more urgently
for the places in the world
where defences are broken,
communities are torn apart
and war has done its worst

yet life must go on.
In the name of Jesus,
who suffered and served among us. Amen.

Monday 20th August Ephesians 3: 7 - 13

*The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke, Minister, The Crossing Church & Centre,
Worksop & Wales Kiveton Methodist Church*

Reading

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, 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. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

Reflection

St Paul refers to himself as "servant" and "the very least of all the saints". In doing so he echoes the call of Jesus upon us all: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all". (Mark 9: 35)

A willingness to be a servant of others is a core consequence and mark of faithful discipleship but it is far from being an easy option. Those familiar with the annual 'Covenant Service' of the Methodist Church will recognise these lines from its preface:

"Christ has many services to be done:
some are easy, others are difficult;
some bring honour, others bring reproach;
some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,
others are contrary to both;
in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;
in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves."

A willingness to embrace such servanthood – when we feel like it, and when we don't – may sometimes be something we are inclined to resist but it is a mark of faithfulness to the One who "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Philippians 2: 6-7). St Paul underlines the fact that it is God's grace that enables him – and us – to fulfil our calling. When it comes to regarding ourselves as "the very least" there is no shortage of parables told by Jesus in which those who think too highly of themselves are put in their place. Nevertheless, today's reading assures us that "in Christ Jesus our Lord ... we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him". There is an implicit irony: invited to embody humility nevertheless we can have boldness and confidence in approaching God.

If we are open and willing today may well offer us a fresh opportunity to serve others and to embody humility. May what we do and who we are enable others to see "the mystery hidden for ages".

A Prayer by St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556):

Teach us, good Lord to serve thee as thou deservest,
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the wounds;