

Homily for Pentecost 25, 2020 (Confirmation)

Ephesians 1:15-23

'Praying for you'

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TEXT

Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I 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, ¹⁸so 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, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God 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, ²¹far 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. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

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INTRODUCTION (305)

When I was at seminary,
we did an assignment where we had to interview a mature Christian on their spiritual journey.

Just ask questions, listen, learn,
About the ways in which God had been at work in that person's life.

It was an extremely fruitful assignment.

There was one theme in particular that still stands out to me as I remember the lady I interviewed.

This lady had done a number of interesting things,

Including serving as a Christian missionary in the middle east.

During that time she shared how her mother died,
And that this was one of the most difficult times in her life.

But then she said something very striking,
She said that amidst the grief you would expect from losing her mum,

One of the **unexpected** and most profound senses of loss she had,
was this thought:

Who will be praying for me now?

Who will be praying for me now?

Her mother was a faithful Christian woman,
and the lady I was talking to always knew in her journey through life,

That her mum was at home holding her in prayer.

It's a powerful thing,
to know there is someone praying for you.

Well,
in our text,

We heard one of the occasions in the New Testament,

When the Apostle Paul lets a group of Christians know **that** he is praying for them,
As well as **what** he is praying for them,

And we can learn a lot from this.

Can I speak especially to our young people,
Even more specifically to those who were scheduled to be confirmed this weekend.

Do you realize...
There are people praying for you?

So what is our prayer?

Well, like Paul,
very simply,

We thank God for what he **has** done,

And we ask God for what he **can** do.

Thanking,
And asking.

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THANKING (610)

Our text begins,

'I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.'

The Apostle Paul is writing to a Christian community in and around a place called Ephesus,
Which was one of the Christian communities he had a big role in as it was getting started.

But Paul was a traveler and a groundbreaker,
He didn't stay in one spot but moved from place to place,

And so it seems he's received reports from people that the young Christian community in Ephesus is going well,

And this is something that warms his heart.

I've heard many stories like this,
of pastors hearing years later good reports from places they've served,

Or even the children and grandchildren of missionaries returning to places served by their forebears,
and *rejoicing* to see the spiritual fruit decades and decades later.

Which gives us a simple analogy,
Think of a garden you've planted somewhere along the way or even just one simple
fruit tree,

And the joy it brings you to hear that garden or that tree is still bearing fruit.

This is the Apostle Paul's experience,

and he wants them to know that he hasn't forgotten them,

he thanks God for them regularly.

But *what* exactly, does he thank God for?

Well he thanks God for the two most basic dimensions of Christianity,

He's thankful for their faith in the Lord Jesus,
And their love toward all the saints.

Again, let me speak to especially to our young people,

We thank God for you,

Your parents,
Your godparents,
Your pastors,
Your youth worker,
This whole congregation,

We thank God for you,
That you are a part of our community,

You need to know that it is an encouragement and a joy to this church just that you
are a part of it.

And why?

Well we're thankful for a lot of things,

But most of all,

We're thankful to God,

For your **faith** in the Lord Jesus,
And you **love** for the saints.

Why is this the focus?

Well because faith is a gift,

You can't manufacture it,
We can't manufacture it,

The Spirit of God has worked in you the gift of faith,

And we thank God for your faith in the Lord Jesus because it's through Jesus that
God's grace and mercy and love has come to you,

We thank God for your faith in the Lord Jesus,

Because it's your Lord Jesus who came into this world to live as one of you,
To die for you,
To rise again from the dead,

As you trust in this Lord Jesus you receive the forgiveness of sins and life with God
forever,

So we thank God for your faith in the Lord Jesus.

And,
we thank God for your love for all the saints,

If faith is the fire within us,
Love for others is the heat and light that radiates out.

It's isn't that the Apostle Paul heard reports of a whole bunch of individuals who were
progressing in the spiritual life on their own,

But he heard of a community which was growing together,
Of a community which showed real love for each other,

And as I again think of our young people in our confirmation program,

what a joy it's been to watch you as a group,
Different in many ways,
Growing in Christian love.

There is a beautiful simplicity to the Christian life at this level,

We thank God for faith in the Lord Jesus,
love for all the saints.

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ASKING (990)

So first,
The Apostle Paul **thanks** God for what he has already done.

But second,
he goes on to **ask** God for what he **can** do.

While on the one hand there is a beautiful simplicity in boiling down the Christian life to faith in the Lord Jesus and love for the saints,

There is at the same time,
an inexhaustible depth to the mysteries and wonders of the Christian life,

And so the Apostle Paul asks God to lead these dear Christians people **deeper** into those mysteries.

It's been said the Christian faith is like the ocean,

Shallow enough for a toddler to wade into,
Deep enough that you can never truly plumb its depths.

So we read,

¹⁷I 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, ¹⁸so 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...'

One of the reasons I wanted to preach on this text in connection with our scheduled confirmation,

Is that Confirmation in the Church has traditionally been associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Here's one of our Confirmation blessings from the Old Testament, Isaiah 11, which is echoed in our text today:

*'God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
Give you his Holy Spirit,
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding;
Sound judgment and strength,
Knowledge, holiness and reverence for the Lord, Amen.'*

Now it's not that we believe these young people haven't already received the Holy Spirit,
The Spirit comes to us in our baptism,
The Spirit is at work in us throughout our Christian lives,
The Spirit is poured out every time we gather in worship and hear the Word of God,

But the Holy Spirit is a person,
not a thing,

So you don't receive the Spirit and have him in your pocket and possess him,

You receive the Spirit's work anew in your life over and over and over again,

This is what we pray for in our young people especially at their confirmation.

So,
What does the Apostle Paul ask for the Spirit to do in the Christians at Ephesus?

Well a number of different things,
Today I just want to focus on one.

He says,

That, 'with the eyes of your heart enlightened... you may know... what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints...'

The Apostle Paul's conviction,

Is that as a baptised believing Christian person,
You have something so glorious,
So extraordinarily rich,
So far beyond your imagination,

That one way of describing your Christian life is simply growing to know more and more **what it is you have** as a Christian person.

There's an analogy here with natural human development.

Those of you who are parents,
Think of one of the big things you're trying to do for your children as they grow,

From one angle,
couldn't you say you're simply trying to get them to understand just what it is they already have.

That as people who live in a free country,

In a relatively safe community,

As people who have a roof over their head and food on their tables and clothes on their backs and a decent education,

You parents know,
that through history and even in our world today this is no small thing,

That we have so much,

And it breaks your heart,
When, as children grow,
they don't realise what they have,

And can even risk wasting it in various ways.

Well,
The Christian life is like this,
Only *infinitely* more so.

Because in Christ Jesus,

You have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

You have a God who chose you in love before the foundation of the world,

You have the adoption as children,

You have redemption through Jesus' blood and the forgiveness of your sins,

You have the gift of the Holy Spirit with you and in you,

You have the promise of a future hope that is sure and certain - life in the presence of God forever,

you have the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead at work in your life even now.

And yes,
To put it another way,
You have a *glorious inheritance*.

Imagine a person,
Who was poor in life?
They struggled by from day to day,

But they received word of a long-lost relative who had left them a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars.

It was all theirs,
Just there waiting for them to access,

But because it seemed too good to be true,
The inheritance sat there and the person never cashed in,

Instead,

they continued to struggle through life,

All the while having a glorious inheritance that belonged to them.

This is the situation of the Christian person,

Who has been baptised,

Who has been raised in the life of the Church,

But who says,

Ahh, I think I'll leave that behind,

Not for me.

That's a tragedy,

Don't let it happen!

And dear young people,

You have learnt a lot,

You have grown in your faith and love,

You have begun to explore the riches of your glorious inheritance in Christ,

But it's only the tip of the iceberg,

It's only the beginning,

Our prayer for you is that the Holy Spirit would enlighten the eyes of your heart,

So that you may **know** the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

Or here's a similar way Paul puts it a chapter later I another prayer,

'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.' Eph 3

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CONCLUSION (190)

A few years ago I was visiting some elderly members in this congregation,

And they were asking me about the young people in confirmation class.

We had printed their names in the bulletin as we often do,

And so they were asking,

Who's this person?

And where does that young lady fit in?

And anything worth knowing about that lad?

I was intrigued and encouraged that these older folk in the congregation were so interested in our young people.

And then I realised part of what was going on more specifically.

They wanted intel for their prayers.

These are faithful elderly Christians praying for these young people,
Some of whom they had never met,
Or may never meet.

Thanking God for their faith in the Lord Jesus,
Their love for the saints,

Asking that the Spirit lead them ever deeper into the wonderful mysteries of life in
God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Friends,

if you've never known this gracious God,
or have been away from him and his Church for a long time,

That is my prayer for you as well.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.