

I once saw a cartoon in a Christian booklet
That pictured a preacher leaning casually on a lectern
And saying in a somewhat jaded manner
'Sure, God loves you, but don't let it go to your heads'.
Of course, the cartoon was meant as a joke,
Because when we listen to God's word,
We hear the opposite message,
And especially when we listen to today's reading from Ephesians,
We hear a prayer that St Paul prays
A prayer that the knowledge of God's love for us in Christ Jesus
Will go to our heads; that it *will* go to our hearts;
That it *will* fill us to more than overflowing,
Not only as individuals but as a community,
So that our whole life together will be shaped and fashioned
By the power of God in us
As we trust in the Good News about Jesus:
The Good news of Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the powers of darkness
A victory he won on our behalf.

So today I'm proclaiming the Good News that we need to hear
If we are to live as God's holy people, who honour each other in love:
The Good News is that God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all
we can ask or imagine, and that his is the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen!

Listen to how today's reading begins: **For this reason**

OK: for what reason? To find out the reason St Paul is talking about

We need to go back to the end of Ephesians chapter 2

In that chapter, as we heard from Pastor Stephen last week,

St Paul has been teaching the Ephesian Christians about the unity

That God is bringing about in the church:

A unity especially between Jew and Gentile:

Between ethnicities that had been hostile to one another.

And this is what St Paul wrote: **[Y]ou [Gentiles] 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.

God, St Paul has been writing, is showing to the whole cosmos
What he is like, what kind of true Father he is,
By bringing together a great family, by adopting people of all ethnicities
Into his household, where they are free to put hostilities aside,
And to grow in heart felt love for each other, so:

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

It's because of the sort of Father God is: a loving, unifying, Father
That St Paul kneels in adoration and prayer.
What's more I think St Paul is saying that every family – human or spiritual -
More or less mirrors the true household
Which is the one established by God in Christ Jesus.

I also think, by the way, that we are meant to take St Paul literally
When he talks about kneeling before the Father.
In the book of Acts we hear about St Paul, on his journey to Jerusalem,
Calling together the elders of Ephesus, and at the end of the account
This is what we hear: **When [St Paul] had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed.** Acts 20:36

Our Lord Jesus also knelt in prayer before his Father:
These details regarding the body language of prayer are recorded in the Bible,
Not that are commanded to kneel in prayer,
But when we do, we can know that we are imitating the early Christians,
St Paul, and Jesus himself.

What we now hear is a prayer that St Paul prays for Christian people.
He is not telling them what to do,
He is letting them know how he speaks up on their behalf to God.
Now St Paul *is* quite happy to give instruction to God's people.
In fact the second half on the letter to the Ephesians is full of teaching
About the sort of life that should mark us out as a community of holy people.
But St Paul wants to start first of all with *who we are*:
Adopted children in the household of God,
And he wants to share with us *how he prays*,
How he speaks up on our behalf to God for what we need.

Here's the first part of St Paul's prayer:

I pray that, according to the riches of [the Father's] 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.

First of all St Paul acknowledges that part of God's glory

Is his ability to be unfathomably generous:

That God can give and give, and that he is not stingy

But ready to help those in need.

Think about the generosity of Jesus: that's what God the Father is like.

St Paul prays that God in his generosity would give us inner strength,

And that by the power of his Spirit Christ would *dwell in our hearts*

As we put our faith in him.

In the modern world when we talk about the heart

We are talking about how we feel: our emotions.

But in the Scriptures the heart means more than this:

It covers a whole range of actions that go on within us:

Things like thinking, grieving, desiring, understanding, and decision making.

And St Paul is praying that Christ may dwell in our hearts

That he may dwell in our thinking, our grieving, our desiring,

Our understanding, and our decision making,

As we place our trust in him.

What could this look like practically? What would it mean

To have Christ through faith dwell, for example, in our decision making?

Well, think about it this way:

Let's say God strengthens us inwardly through his Spirit-filled word:

That he assures us that all our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake.

That although we have no excuse for the wrong things that we have done,

That it would be strict justice for us to suffer the full consequence of our sin,

That nevertheless for Christ's sake

He does not hold our sin against us, but cancels our debt.

What would this inward assurance mean when people sin against us?

It would mean that we would not take offence easily

It would mean that we would not dwell on our desire for vengeance

On those who have sinned against us.

It would mean that we would not give those who have sinned against us
The silent treatment, but that we would go to them
And have the courage that comes from faith
To name the hurt that we have felt, to name the sin,
But to do this with the desire to be reconciled, to live in the peace
That flows from forgiveness and mutual love.

This is very practical, and when we see this at work in individuals
And in the church community, we see the sort of Father that God is.

And St Paul is praying for Christian people, for us,
That since our roots go down into the rich soil of God's love,
And since we are being built on the sure foundation of God's love for us,
That Christ himself, including his way of thinking and acting,
May be at work in us as individuals,
And among us as God's holy people.

St Paul goes on with his 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.**

St Paul here is praying that the Ephesian Christians, that we also
Would be given power from God to comprehend
Not just as individuals, but as a church community, in our life together,
The love of Christ: a love that is revealed especially
In his self-sacrifice for us on the cross.

It's not that we don't already have some comprehension of God's love for us,
But it is the case that we have *infinite room* to grow in this knowledge.

It's the case that as the penny drops: as we have the aha! moments
Of understanding for the first time, or again, or in a different way,
That God in Christ Jesus loves us,
Approves of us,
Is generous with us,
Will give us peace in place of our sins,
And a resurrected body
In place of our mortal bodies that are going towards death,
When we comprehend these things it's not just the case

That we are restored as human beings,
But that we find our true humanity as we share in the very life of God.

There is, it seems to me, a great mystery here,
Which is like the mystery of the incarnation.
In the incarnation God the Son, the second person of the Trinity,
The one through whom and for whom all things were made,
Took on human flesh and became one of us.
The infinite stopped down into the finite:
God became a helpless baby in the lap of his mother.

Through faith in Christ, we who are made of the clay of the earth,
Who, according to our sinful nature are headed towards death and decay,
Through faith in Christ we are filled with the infinite fullness of God.
We are brought, as embodied human beings, in Christ,
To reign with him at the right hand of the Father.

None of us naturally believe this, but God through the message of Christ,
Puts his Spirit inside us, not just to fill us to the brim,
But to expand us, to open us out,
To grow us into the stature of his Son.

This cannot be done by human power: it is the work of God
And so St Paul closes today's reading,
Which also brings to an end the first half of his letter to the Ephesians,
With a doxology: with word that Glorifies 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.**

God, who shows his abundant generosity in Christ Jesus,
Who shows what sort of Father he is by bringing us into unity
With people from every nation, every language, every tribe,
This God can do more for us than we can ask or imagine.
St Paul knew this, he trusted this, and he used his status as an apostle to pray,
Not doubting, but believing that God would most generously give.
We too are now free ourselves to pray for others
That they with us, would comprehend the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So may we as a Church, gathered together
By the Spirit-filled Good News of Christ Jesus,
Glorify together our Father as he leads us to pray for each other, and to
live in love for each other. In Jesus' name! Amen!