

SERMON: For This Reason - The Salvation of All Humanity: Ephesians 3.14-21

Dear Father, may we bow before you in humility, forever grateful for our salvation through the love of Christ. Amen

Have you ever felt driven to do something? Did you feel the hand of God compelling and guiding you to do it? It may not have made a lot of sense at the time, but did you eventually come to understand why you had to do it? When I was in Years 11 and 12 I knew that once I finished school I just had to go to London. I got all sorts of jobs, saved my money, got my tickets and passport and so left Perth for the UK by myself, at 17 years of age and ended up staying there for over 5 years. It took me a long time to see God's hand in that but when I did it was clear that the experiences I had during that time laid a vital foundation for the rest of my faith journey.

As I read today's Ephesians text from chapter 3, I wondered what it must have been like for Paul to be driven to spread the gospel message to the Gentiles. Verses 14 to 21 give us some insight into understanding what inspired Paul so deeply. They are a powerful prayer which opens with the words: "For this reason..." So it begs the question, what is the reason for this prayer? The answer is given in the first half of this same chapter. Verses 1 and 6 tell us: "*This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles... that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*"

Paul passionately delivered the gospel message of unity. A new unified community of Jews and Gentiles through whom God would achieve His ultimate plan for the salvation of all humanity! It was for **this** world altering reason that Paul prayed for the new followers of Jesus. He knew that it was no easy mission and so he sought to inspire these early Christians by beseeching their Father to give them all that they needed to fulfil their task. His prayer has the same import for us today. We too can gain much inspiration from the words he prayed, so let's explore carefully what he humbly requested of God on bowed knees.

Verse 16 begins his petition: ¹⁶ *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*

Theologian R. Finlayson suggests that here Paul's "*conception of God is sublime, ... He grants, not like a being of limited powers, but like Himself. He is glorified in bestowing large blessings upon his people.*"

And the first blessing that Paul asked to be granted, recognizes the weakness within each of us. Alone our inner being is often not up to the task of fulfilling God's mission. We get caught up in the trappings of our material life. We each have personal failings that can block us from our Father. Yet with the power of God's Holy Spirit our inner being can be strengthened. When we ask for His strength then we can achieve things well beyond our own abilities.

The second blessing requested is in verse 17: *"¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love"*

Each petition flows from the other. Having asked for God's power, the Holy Spirit can imbue us with a deepening of faith; a faith which allows Christ to become such an intimate part of our lives that he is present in all our thoughts, words and actions. How wonderful it is when we experience that closeness in our heart of hearts. And the closer we get the more we realise that all those thoughts, words and actions are grounded in God's love. Love is the essence of our being precisely because our Father created us out of His need to have a loving relationship with each of His creations. The more we seek the power of God's Spirit, the more we may be intimate with Jesus. The more Jesus dwells in our hearts the more our lives our grounded in love.

And that leads to the next blessing requested in verse 18: *"¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."*

If our life is to be grounded in love then how are we to comprehend that love? Paul points us directly to Christ and throughout his biblical writings has much to say on this topic. It is beautifully expressed in Chapter 13 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

"⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"

This is the love that Jesus displayed during his earthly ministry. It is shown in his healing and feeding of the multitudes in our gospel reading today. Above all the magnitude of Christ's love is displayed in two key ways. First, He accepts us just as we are. Despite all our imperfections He reaches out His hand and heart so that we may know His Father as our Father. Second, His love is so vast that he was able to endure humiliation and suffering upon the cross for each of us and forgive the people who did it to him.

Once again each blessing follows the other, like climbing a ladder rung by rung. To comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of this intellectually unknowable love we must first seek the power of God's Spirit and ask to know Jesus in our heart. On that foundation of power and strong relationship then we can begin to experience the depth of Christ's love. And through that love receive the rich blessing of being filled with the fullness of God.

Each of these blessings is not something that can be easily understood with our minds. Indeed, as Paul states, they surpass knowledge. But they can be deeply experienced and through that be truly known to us. I invite you to reflect on your own experiences. When has your inner being been strengthened? When have you realised that God is an intimate part of your thoughts, words and actions? When did you last recognise the depth of God's love for yourself, your family, your brothers and sisters in Christ, your neighbour or for all His creation? During our Share and Prayer time I encourage you tell us about any of these experiences. For now I will share an experience had by our Revd Anne Ranse from Holy Covenant. This week she wrote about an early morning encounter with God.

The naked trees are still. The Grevilia bush, loaded with clusters of honey filled flowers is still, empty of hungry, excited Wattle Birds, the air is so still and the sky is the soft blue of morning light. The birds are still asleep and the face of God is in everything I see and I am touched with the incense of the flowering Daphne and from my sacred space I can feel God drawing me in, drawing me into himself and resting in the God space of my heart. Its fuel for the day ahead, its set me on the right path for the day, It's a warm feeling to fall back on when things are hard and tricky in the day. It's the presence of God travelling with me. Oh, not to be missed, those precious sustaining moments with God. They are yours, they are mine, they are free.

When we connect on this spiritual level with our God of love then we can begin to understand what motivated Paul and all the early followers of Jesus. We too can be inspired to reach out with the gospel message of the saving grace of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all humanity. We too can give God the glory as we accomplish things beyond our wildest dreams. For as Paul finishes his prayer in verse 20:

²⁰ 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, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.