

Sermon on Ephesians 3.1-21

What do you think of when I say 'church'. This building? A building somewhere near where you live? The worldwide church throughout the world? Here in Cumbria - our churches are gathered into mission communities, like this one and so when we say church we don't just think of one kind of church, but ecumenical colleagues, working together, which is great.

It's easy to feel disheartened. I see the conflicts and the arguments. I love the little rhyme: *"To dwell above with saints we love, Oh, that will be all glory. But to dwell below with saints we know, Well, that's another story"* And I despair that there can ever be unity. And I see the awful headlines, rightly negative about lapses in safeguarding and the dreadful damage that has done. I see the attendance graphs going in the wrong direction, in the UK at least, in some denominations at least. In my worse moments I wonder if the church can ever be the amazing, dynamic, missional force for the Kingdom of God in our fallen and broken world it was intended to be. Is that just me?

But this evening I want to try and blow your mind when it comes to thinking about church. I would like us to think about how Jesus sees his church, and how the church - you and me - fits into God's huge enormous cosmic plan for all creation.

So let's take a closer look at Ephesians 3. Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesian church probably while he was under house arrest in Rome. It's called 'Ephesians' in our bibles, but we don't really know if it was written to the actual Ephesians.

- It starts with *"To God's holy people in Ephesus"*. But the 'in Ephesus' part was added at a later date.
- There's no list of personal names to greet as in Paul's other letters (Romans has over 26).
- And Paul doesn't refer to any specific controversies or heresies as he does in other letters.

So this is probably a kind of church circular, intended for several fellowships in wider area of western Turkey (a bit like the Diocesan e-news, or a parish magazine).

And Ephesians is really a big picture book. It's not too concerned with the details, but it paints a big sweep

God.

And his plans.

And how much he loves us.

And how amazing he is.

And how Jesus sees his church.

Actually in the reading which we just heard the word 'church' only comes once - and we'll come to that in a minute.

But there's another word that appears 4 times.

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.* 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.

Did you spot what it is? Mystery.

So what is the mystery of Paul speaks?

It's there in verse 6: "*Gentiles (that's anyone who is not a Jew, which is most of us here) have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*".

So what does that mean? Only the fact that you and I get to be the church.

You see, Paul's original Jewish readers would have had the view that they were God's only special ones. They had grown up with the deeply engrained view that their religion, culture, practices, everything pointed to

- they and only they were God's people.
- They and they only were the heirs of Abraham.
- They and the only they were God's chosen ones.

But now Paul is saying - no - because of what Jesus has done through his cross and resurrection - we all get to be the church!

Jesus is in the business of breaking down barriers between people. That's what the whole of the Ephesians is all about.

And here he says that the barrier that says only the Jewish people could be God's people is well and truly down - and we all get to join in.

- You and I get to be fellow heirs with God's people the Jews,
- You and I get to be adopted into his family,
- you get to share the promises that all his children look forward to.

Membership of the body of Christ, with our brothers and sisters, this radical new community of belonging and reconciliation, is absolutely central to the Gospel. Through Jesus's life, death and resurrection, we now have this deep unity between people of diverse racial, cultural and political backgrounds. That is the good news.

So what is the church for anyway?

I want to answer that by looking at verse 10.

Let's read that, plus a few verses before it starting at verse 7 *"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; - here it is - 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"*

The word for manifold (or 'rich variety') is the one used to describe something of many colours, like a beautiful rug (like the one we've just brought), or wall hanging, or like Joseph's coat.

Paul talks a lot about the heavenly realms in his letters and it basically means - all the stuff that we can't see. It simply means the eternal and spiritual reality, all that is beyond our seeing, where God is at work.

It's a different way of seeing things.

- You and I know that *this world is not all there is*.
- You and I know that we can *watch the news and feel hopeless* but in Christ 'in the heavenlies' we the hope of eternity.
- You and I know that someone can get a *terminal diagnosis* but 'in the heavenlies' there is can be healing.
- You and I know that *"we walk by faith and not by sight"*.

And how is God's manifold wisdom revealed in the heavenly realms?

Oh, Only through the church!

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms

It's as if the church becomes a lecture theatre for the rulers and authorities to show them God's wisdom. The church - you and me - is the advertisement to the heavenlies of the beautiful multicoloured wisdom of God. The Message translation puts it a bit better I think: *"Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!"*

Let's think how to illustrate this.

Apparently sometimes this thing happens where 22 millionaires get together in a field to kick around a bag full of air in their underpants. It's otherwise known as a football match. And when a team of such millionaires wins a big air-kicking competition, they parade through a city, not in their underpants anymore, but fully clothed, stood on top of an open topped bus. And everyone comes out to cheer and wave and the streets are filled and there are streamers, and slowly this bus drives through the streets with the football team on top and everyone goes, look there's the victorious air-kicking team - hooray!

So this is like God has won the best prize ever by sending *his son Jesus to live and die and unite all things*. And God parades how great is this victory through the streets of the heavenlies, in front of all the watching powers and principalities, rulers and authorities.

And - ok here is the good bit - just who is on the top of the bus, carrying the trophy?

THE CHURCH!!

Yes! Us!

Picture YOUR CHURCH now on the victory bus.

The church is how God chooses to make known the wisdom of his brilliant plan to redeem the world. The mere existence of the church demonstrates that Christ has been victorious. Now if that doesn't transform the way you see the church, I don't know what will. Paul gives us a BIG VISION for what the church is and could be.

So maybe we shouldn't feel too pessimistic or cynical about the church.

The great news of Ephesians 3 is that God's church - your local gathering of "called out" ones - is caught up the mystery of God since the beginning of time to show the world the wisdom of God's plans.

So a question we might want to ask ourselves is this:

In what ways is my church showing the multicoloured wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in my neighbourhood? I dare you to start your next PPC or church leadership meeting with that question!

- When we demonstrate our unity in Christ,
- when we show that walls are being broken down rather than put up,

- when we refuse hostility and division, when we treat each other as Christian brothers and sisters,
- When we work together to address the needs of our communities

then we show to the rulers and authorities the wisdom of God, BY BEING THE CHURCH CHRIST DIED TO CREATE.

So you might be sitting there thinking, yes but all this fancy theology stuff is all very well for the *ideal* church. God must have had in mind some other reality called '*the church*', which is a million miles from away from ordinary mortals like me, or my church, especially St Botolph's in Little Puddle.

Well so here's the news.

He doesn't.

Not in reality or even in God's mind or God's plan, or up God's sleeve.

There is no ideal and abstract church that is any different from the church gathering you are part of.

Remember that Paul was writing all this wonderful stuff to real churches around Ephesus.

So was *that* the ideal church? Far from it!

Acts 19 shows that the Ephesus church was badly disciplined and small. Just read Paul's letters to Timothy - the leader of Ephesus church - to see that this church had its fair share of issues.

Yet it's to *this church* that Paul writes this amazing stuff.

It's not like there is a perfect church 'out there' that we just need to find.

This is it folks! THIS is all there is.

God loves his church and God knows that it is imperfect and God wants to see it grow and thrive and flourish, and make a difference for the Kingdom in our communities.

We can have "*boldness and confidence through faith in him*" as it says in verse 12.

Paul ends by praying for the church -

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 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, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 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.

Emma Ineson

And then he ends with this wonderful blessing, which builds up in layers - and is a great way to pray ... so let's do that together now.

Now to God who, according to his power that is at work within us ...

1.... is able to do - *think of the fact that God is able to do stuff. He is not inactive. (he's not inactive)*

2.... is able to do what we ask *(he hears our prayers)*

3.... is able to do what we ask or imagine *(he hears even the prayers we don't speak)*

4.... is able to do ALL we ask or imagine *(he can do anything; nothing is impossible)*

5.... is able to do MORE than all we ask or imagine *(his dreams are bigger than ours)*

6.... is able to do IMMEASURABLY more than all we ask or imagine *(his dreams are INFINITELY bigger than ours)*

- *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!*

And all God's people said ...

- **Amen!**