

## Sermon on Ephesians 3.1-13

5 June 2016, St. Nicholas Cuddington (Eph 3.10-13; John 4.19-26)

Prayer.

This last week saw one of the two American presidential contenders endorsed by the Government of North Korea and the other under threat of FBI indictment for compromising the identities of American secret agents on her insecure email server. Our British politicians meanwhile seem reduced to absurd and unproductive speculations about Brexit on both sides of that debate, while the world is facing plenty of challenges that seem far more important and worthy of this country's attention.

Maybe it's time to think about the nature of leadership – and Christian leadership in particular. That's what Paul does in our passage from Ephesians this morning.

With its almost complete lack of personal detail about its author or even its recipients, Ephesians is less a letter than a kind of portable summary of Paul's gospel sent as a circular to churches in Asia Minor. It is full of majestic language as it celebrates the gift of God's mercy in Jesus Christ promised before the ages and now brought into our lives by the cross and resurrection and received by faith. Chapter 2 focuses on the meaning of salvation as God's free gift of rescue that enables us to participate in his project of peace within his chosen people Israel, from whom we are no longer divided but with whom we are built together as the temple of God.

Today we turn to chapter 3 in which Paul takes a slight detour to tell us about his own vocation on behalf of the gospel and the church. It's one of the characteristics of Paul's ministry and teaching that he doesn't simply get up and lecture his churches on what they need to know and what they need to do, but that he reflects on himself as the recipient of that same message, and as chosen by God to give his life in its service. (He also does this in chapter 1 of the closely related letter to the Colossians.)

That may not sound particularly remarkable. But do think about how differently our politicians operate, for example in relation to the current debate about the European Referendum. We don't really hear them out spelling out a vision about what Europe means to them personally or how they have devoted their lives to making it a success. Similarly, those favouring Brexit don't really articulate a credible vision of how a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain might look and how their lives are wholly devoted to making it a reality.

But that's precisely what Paul does. He believes passionately that he has been given this same grace of God in a way that demands of him the exercise of a sacred stewardship and trust with which he is personally consumed.

As he puts it elsewhere in his letters, Paul longs to lay hold of the prize of fellowship with Christ just as Christ has made Paul his own. That encounter with the Lord who claims us as his own is still available to us as in the experience of that story from the Gospel reading we heard earlier: the woman who meets Jesus at the well in Samaria tries to deal with his invitation by showing off her knowledge of facts and kicking this ball into the long grass: yes of course, she says, "I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." But what Jesus wants is not to win an argument but to win her life: "I, the one speaking to you—I am he." This is what Paul has found as well: the gift and calling of Christ demands nothing less than all we are and have.

One of the oddities of my job in that very odd place called Oxford is that as a fellow of my College I am also a trustee of that educational charity. As such I am personally liable for the good

health and functioning of that place – for example in relation to a recent decision to build a new graduate centre and increase our student numbers by 100. If as the body of governing fellows we run the place into the ground by a disastrous financial or personnel decision, we are personally responsible and I could potentially lose the very shirt off my back. For me this is a rather scary condition of my employment, and of course I have to hope it doesn't come to that! But it's certainly a case of in for a penny, in for a pound...

For Paul his investment in the gospel of God goes much further. It's all-consuming, something that compels him and engages him with every fibre of his being. By saying that he is a steward of God's gift and call, Paul identifies himself as a trustee who is bound up with that gift and call with everything he is and has.

Paul starts out by alluding to his suffering for this ministry, as currently a prisoner in Rome for Christ Jesus on behalf of the Gentile believers. But he breaks off mid-sentence to share his continued excitement about his calling.

Far from despairing, in his imprisonment Paul remains fully committed and convinced about the reason he became God's apostle and ambassador in the first instance. He has received the special favour of God's revelation of what he called his mystery, which means God's plan to save the world. The amazing news with which Paul and the other apostles have been entrusted and empowered by the Spirit is that God has fulfilled his promise in the cross and resurrection of Jesus – not just for a few Palestinian Jews but for all humankind. Israel and the nations have become stakeholders together in God's redemption of the world.

Paul is well aware that he falls short in many ways, and is very far from the perfect candidate for this sort of ministry: by describing himself as “less than the least of all the Lord's people”, he alludes to his very troubled and bloody past as a persecutor of the very church he now serves.

But even if Paul himself is flawed and inadequate as the messenger, his message is overwhelmingly encouraging and concerns the boundless and unsearchable riches of Christ. The treasure of Christ is “inexhaustible” – or as St Gregory the Great famously put it in the sixth century, the word of God is like a great river that is at once shallow and deep, where a lamb may safely wade yet an elephant can swim.<sup>1</sup>

Paul's task is to explain what he calls the “economy” of this mystery – God's plan for the salvation of the world that was hidden in ages past but has now become visible and proclaimed in Christ. Here in verse 10 it's interesting that Paul doesn't say it's being made known by the apostles, as if this is somehow the job of special religious officials. Instead, he says God's plan is being made known in all the cosmos *through the church*, that's to say through all of us who have in Christ received the gift of access to God in boldness and confidence.

So in a way Paul's talk of his own calling has an unexpected twist in the tale: Paul is not like Mohammed Ali who died this week – the champion boxer who achieved great things for himself but also could never stop talking about how he was the greatest – that's even the title of his autobiography published last year! (Though one of the more amusing anecdotes about him in the papers this weekend was of him refusing to put on a seat belt on a flight, telling the flight attendant “Superman don't need no seat belt.” He got his comeuppance when she replied, “Mr Ali, Superman don't need no plane.”)

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<sup>1</sup> *Moralia* (Comm. On Job), Epistle 4.

Paul is not Superman. Instead he sees his own work, and even his present imprisonment, as a gift of God for the empowerment of the church.

The upshot of this entire explanation is that Paul now encourages his readers, “so I beg you please don’t be disheartened because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.” Because of the work of Christ we are empowered to pray to God as Father not with timidity but with boldness. Far from disabling or invalidating Paul’s life and ministry, his imprisonment for Christ is an integral part of the fulfilment of his vocation. He is entrusted with the gospel and his identification with that ministry goes all the way down. In Colossians he speaks of filling up in his own person the full measure of Christ’s messianic sufferings, and a similar thought seems to be at work here. Paul sees his imprisonment for Christ as a perfectly natural and integral consequence of a life fully dedicated to his mission.

So for Paul the apostle as for the woman at the well and all of us who are invited into the gospel story, the encounter with Jesus sets off a powerful chain reaction of being redeemed and claimed as Christ’s own with everything they are, and enrolled in his mission to save the world. That same dynamic is at work in Christ’s invitation to us today: in whatever place of weakness or challenge we find ourselves, he calls us to become partners with Paul and others who have gone before us in God’s plan of salvation in Christ for Israel and all nations:

God’s 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,<sup>11</sup> according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>12</sup> In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. AMEN