

Sermon 25th July 2021 – The Bigness of God Ephesians 3:14-21

When I was in my early twenties I had my first opportunity to travel to Europe, singing with the Catholic Cathedral Choir. We visited many wonderful Cathedrals – as I know many of you have done, too. The largest was, of course, St Peter's in Rome ... where I felt quite overwhelmed by the size of it, the sense of awe and wonder it engendered, the sense of God's "bigness" and my "smallness".

I wonder how many of you have been struck by the beautiful moon over the past few nights? Has your response been "wow"?

The book of Ephesians is one which has the potential to create that same sort of sense of awe in response to the "bigness" of God. The introduction to the book which is included in our pew Bibles says, "The letter to the Ephesians is concerned first of all with God's plan to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as its head" (Eph 1:10). That's a big vision.

Today's reading from Ephesians 3 is a prayer – placed right in the middle of a letter to a church, or, more probably, a group of churches. The first five verses are a prayer for the readers – the "you" Paul (or possibly a close associate of Paul) uses here is plural, so it is a prayer for a church community – and the last two verses are a doxology, or a prayer of praise to God. I will come back to talk about that division between the two parts of the prayer later.

I've entitled today's sermon "The Bigness of God" (which I know isn't grammatical!) because Paul's prayer raises some big ideas about God.

1. The first of these big ideas relates to the *TRINITY*.

The New Testament doesn't attempt to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, and Paul isn't addressing the doctrine here, but it is Biblical passages like this one which have fed into the church's developing understanding of the Trinity over several centuries – that is the belief in "one God in three persons" – God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

- Paul's prayer is directed to the Father.
- He prays that Christ will make a permanent home in the readers' hearts.
- And he prays that his readers may be strengthened by the power of the Spirit.

It's beyond the scope of this sermon – and it is beyond my ability – to "explain" the Trinity. Most theology textbooks include some reference to the historical development of the Church's understanding of the Trinity as many different ideas were thrashed out and formal statements of faith (or creeds) were developed. But there remain differences among theologians' understanding of the Trinity today. After doing a bit of reading for this sermon, I must admit I felt somewhat reassured when I read in a Theology text book by Alister McGrath, "The Trinity is a remarkably difficult area of Christian theology." (263) God is so big.

St Barnabas home group discussion – as we studying the Lord’s Prayer we were talking among ourselves about how we pray, and whether there are times at which it seems appropriate, or feels comfortable, to address our prayers to different persons of the Trinity:

- “Our Father who art in heaven ...”
- The very ancient “Jesus prayer”: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
- “Holy Spirit, come, confirm us
In the truth that Christ makes known;
We have faith and understanding
Through your helping gifts alone.”

I find it quite reassuring that in Paul’s prayer the Father, Son and Spirit are all included in an integrated way. I also find it helpful that there are many names for God, and images of God, in Scripture. I am sure if we were to brainstorm some of them we could come up with quite a long list. “El Shaddai – Lord God Almighty,” “Jehovah Jireh – Our God will provide,” “Shepherd,” “Advocate,” “King” ... and (perhaps most appropriately in relation to today’s reading) “God is love”. God is so much bigger than we can ever imagine. Our language will always be inadequate.

2. The second big idea that Paul’s prayer raises is one that we were exploring last week in our service, and that is the idea of UNITY.

Paul begins his prayer: “**For this reason, I fall on my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.**” Like last week’s “Therefore ...” which Hamish spoke about, “For this reason” is one of those phrases which prompts us to look back to see what has preceded it. What *is* the reason that Paul is praying this particular prayer?

Earlier in this chapter, and in the preceding chapter, Paul has been writing about his ministry to the Gentiles – those who were formerly not considered to be part of God’s chosen people, but now have become *one people* through Christ. Those of you who were here last week might recall that Hamish spoke about walls – barriers between people and God, and walls between people – that Christ has broken down. Now Paul prays to the Father from whom “every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. Paul is reminding his readers that the God to whom they pray is the God of *all people and of all creation*. For some of the original readers this might have been rather a disturbing idea.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, begins this short book, *Meeting God in Paul*, with a chapter entitled “Outsiders and Insiders: Paul’s Social World.” He writes: “Paul belongs in a world where it is of first importance to know exactly where you stand. Inside or outside? A citizen or a migrant? A free person or a slave? A Jew or a Gentile? A Pharisee or a Sadducee? A man or a woman? A world where the lines are deeply etched and there is very little possibility of crossing them, a world of complex identity politics ... Such categories mattered intensely to Paul’s contemporaries. They were literally matters of life and death, determining where your security lay, the rights you could claim, the advantages you believed you had.” (15-17)

Rowan Williams reminds his readers that when Paul declares that boundaries between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female have been broken down, he is reflecting what Jesus has modelled: “Jesus refuses to accept that in order to belong to the people of God you have to start with a bundle of qualifications, ethnic or legal or social. Jesus extends the dignity of fully belonging to the people of God to all kinds of people in whose company the respectable and the pious emphatically did not want to be.”

When Paul prays for Christ to strengthen his readers, dwell within them, and give them power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep is Christ’s love, his prayer arises out of this context. The early church *needed* Christ’s power to *understand* the extraordinary breadth of God’s love for them and for those who were very different from them, and *to live in unity* with one another. Unity with people who were not only very different from themselves, and formerly regarded as enemies, would not come easily to Paul’s readers.

How about for us? Human nature being what it is, loving unity is something we still need to pray as well as work for. We can often be suspicious or fearful of people who are different from ourselves – the “other” - especially if our relationships have been tarnished by former events or interactions.

Art exhibition at the Ulster Museum in Belfast. Response to the Troubles in Ireland from the 1960s to the 1990s. Exhibition of 18 huge portraits by Colin Davidson, called “Silent Witness.” Very challenging.

The artist describes the series of paintings as an “emotive response which reflects on how the conflict has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on not just the eighteen sitters, but thousands of individuals – the injured, their families, the families of those who died and the wider community.”



Colin Davidson, Silent Testimony, Ulster Museum, Belfast.

Example: “Stuart McCausland’s mother, Lorraine (23), was beaten to death by a gang on 8th March 1987. Lorraine’s body was found face-down in a stream near Tynedale Community Centre in Belfast. She was a single mother of two boys, Stuart and Craig. Eighteen years later, on 11th July 2005, Craig (20) was shot dead in front of his girlfriend and her two young children.”

What I found most moving about the exhibition was that Colin Davidson chose to document their stories without mentioning their religion or which side of the Troubles they were embroiled in, believing it not to be relevant to their suffering. Exploration of ‘common

humanity' is the foundation on which Silent Testimony rests.

The artist clearly wanted to break down long-standing divisions within his community. A challenging task in any age.

3. A third big idea: Paul prays not only that his readers will know the breadth or extent of Christ's love, but that they will also know how abundant it is – how much of it there is to go round.

After the feeding of the 5000 – the people did not just have “enough” to eat – but there were all those baskets left over. “as much as they wanted” – “twelve baskets of leftovers”. Jesus said, “I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (or “in all its fullness”).

It can be so hard for us to really believe and receive, not only in our minds, but in our hearts, the greatness of God's love. Paul writes, “I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love. ... May you come to know his love – although it can never be fully known – and so be completely filled with the very nature of God.” That's a BIG prayer for the community of believers.

In writing about today's readings, Jane Williams says: “Christian praying and believing can be very small and unimaginative, as if we don't really think God can manage more than the “three wishes” of so many fairy tales. We need to hoard our wishes, and make sure we only ask for what we really want and don't waste the magical power. But Ephesians says, “Don't be so silly.” It constantly widens the frame, so that our lives are put in the context of God the creator and redeemer of the world.” And, I would add, our lives are put in the context of God's abundant love.

So, to sum up – Paul's prayer is one which encompasses some big theological ideas – trinity, unity, abundance. But some of you might have noticed that I haven't yet returned to the point I raised near the start of this sermon, that this prayer ends with a doxology, or hymn of praise to God – as our service will, today.

When I was studying Theology at Otago University, one of the most difficult subjects I took was “Christology,” which was taught by Professor Ivor Davidson. One thing that really stuck with me from that course is that he began and ended the course with prayer. Although I can no longer remember the exact words he used, the gist of it was that praise of God follows from theological reflection. I hope that that is the case today. That the outcome of our reflection on Paul's big vision of God and God's love for us all, will be praise and thanksgiving. In Paul's words: “To God be the glory, in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, for ever and ever! Amen.”