

## All Saints Talk for 26<sup>th</sup> January 2025

Together We Stand.

### **'Members of one body' Tom Yacomeni**

Ephesians 3v1-21 God's Plan for the Gentiles

**3** For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

<sup>2</sup> Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. <sup>4</sup> In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. <sup>6</sup> This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

<sup>7</sup> I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. <sup>10</sup> 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, <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. <sup>13</sup> I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family<sup>[a]</sup> in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Today is the fourth week of our sermon series called 'Together we stand' looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Over these past few weeks we have seen how Paul wrote to the church and Christians down the ages that God has chosen us on purpose, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to love one another and grow as a living body and building where He delights to dwell, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone of it all. Christianity is not something you can choose to do alone. We all need each other to be knitted together into a fellowship that somehow carries the glory of God.

The irony is that Paul was isolated in a prison cell when he encouraged the Ephesians to value their togetherness. He could not travel, hold meetings or preach openly. But he was able to have visitors like Tychicus who is mentioned in chapter 6 and was probably commissioned by Paul to deliver and read out his letter to the churches around Ephesus. So despite his chains, Paul was determined to remain fully connected to fellow believers, and his words are still helping us to stand together in the faith today.

But Paul was also acutely aware that it didn't look great for him to be a Christian leader and evangelist stuck in prison. In today's executive speak the 'optics weren't good'. He didn't want the believers to be discouraged by his situation. After all, whatever happened to the abundant life that Jesus promised?

So the bigger question he tries to answer is this: What should a fulfilled & glorious Christian life actually look like?

I wonder what you think of when you consider what it might be like to be really blessed?

For many people perhaps there is that idyllic desire to be being warm, comfortable and well fed, surrounded by friends and family, enjoying the fruits of hard work and success. Or perhaps for others it is the freedom to travel and see the sights or experience the thrill of sport or creativity. Maybe for some it is actually long life, good health with the hope of a quiet life and well-earned rest.

Well there is nothing wrong with these things of course but they are not what Paul actually has in mind as he describes what it is to be 'filled to the measure of the fulness of God' in the conclusion of the passage.

For Paul, prison walls were no barrier to living an abundant life. Instead the key to fulfilment is knowing that God is for us, loves us and has a plan for us irrespective of our circumstances. God's love for you does not change whether you are in a prison or in a pulpit, but our grip on that fact can be challenged, and our perspective can become distorted.

So what Paul offers us in this passage is a prescription for what to do when we feel downhearted and start to lose sight of God's love – his *prescription for a downcast soul*.

It is a strange thing to be a vicar. It is my job to be encouraging and to always point people to the love of God. So it can be a bit of a crisis when you start to feel discouraged, and the love of God seems more hazy.

Towards the end of the summer last year many of you know that I came rather close to experiencing burn out. The Rock project had been taking its toll, the CofE was having a tough time (still is) and it felt like I was simply trying to keep too many plates of responsibility spinning. I lost perspective.

Several things happen when you lose perspective. It was like the love of God became dulled in my mind. Fear started to replace faith. I felt overwhelmed by the amount of things that needed doing and wasn't sleeping properly. The low point came when I started to think that God was somehow disappointed, that all the things I had omitted to do would somehow swallow me into a huge pit of failure.

Thank God for a wonderful team who allowed me 3 weeks off in August to rest, recuperate and recover my perspective.

The first thing I needed to recover was my perspective that God is in charge, not me.

Paul spends the first half of chapter 3 reminding the Ephesians that despite the fact that he is in prison, God was still in charge and using him to fulfil his plans and had entrusted him with a marvellous message of hope and freedom. He reminds them that God had called him by grace.

*<sup>7</sup> I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ*

So part one of Paul's prescription for a downcast soul:

God is in charge and his grace and his call are irrevocable.

If you have called on the name of the Lord at some point in your life, then you have been assigned a mandate, a calling that is yours to fulfil and he who started a work in you will complete it.

Whatever we are going through, God can use it for his glory. Remember the promise of Romans 8v28: God brings all things together for good for those that love him.

The second remedy for a downcast soul is to remember you are not alone.

God has placed us in a church, which despite all its failings, is where God shows off his grace.

Verse 10: <sup>10</sup> 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, <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.

We are members of one body and sharers in the amazing grace of Jesus. The church works best when we surprise each other with grace, forgiveness and love. We love because God first loved us – we are children of the same heavenly Father. I was so grateful in the summer for Peter Ward telling me to take more time off in August and reassuring me that everything would be fine. God is gracious. We resist the devil and his schemes by remembering that God's grace is sufficient for us. His power is made perfect in weakness.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> remedy for a downcast soul is to remind ourselves of the vastness of God's love, and that love is untouched by my fears and failings.

A few years back I was privileged to be taken out on a speed boat out into the Severn estuary to see the islands of Steepholm and Flatholm. The sun was beginning to set so we turned back and that was when we saw the bows of an enormous cargo freight ship bearing down on us through the channel. We stayed well clear of course, because those ships go faster than you realise and generate big waves in the wake behind them.

But it is only when you get up close to one of these huge ships that you realise how big they really are. Propellers as tall as this room, pistons wide enough to climb into.

You have to be really close to appreciate the scale of them.

That is the heart of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in verses 14-21, that they get close enough to Christ to appreciate just how massive his love for us really is.

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

How can we possibly measure something so infinitely huge and expansive as the love of Christ? Well we can't, but we can get a sense of the scale of his love, as we get closer to him. As though instead of trying to stand back, we get up close and personal. We realise that his love is not going to be dented or held back by my mess ups.

There is a peculiar wonderful branch of mathematics that just deals with infinity. It is a strange truth that infinity minus 1 still equals infinity. But even more remarkable is that infinity minus 100 trillion still equals infinity.

The love of God that spans the universe is infinite in its proportions. There is always more. Our mistakes and failures do not detract from the infinite love of Christ.

The greatest problem in the church today is that we have a wallet sized picture of God when the universe cannot contain him.

So Paul's prescription for a downcast soul

- 1) God is in charge
- 2) You are not alone
- 3) His love for us is unending and unrestricted

God is not disappointed with you. He just wants us to pray to know his love more.

Paul's final promise is that God will be able to do more than we can ask or imagine, despite our circumstances.

And he was right – here we are 2000 years later being encouraged by his letter and prayer. I bet he never conceived it would spread to billions of people and see lives changed by the love of Christ for millennia!

He can do more than we can ever ask or imagine – even if our problems feel intractable or our circumstances are restrictive. His grace is sufficient for us.

Let's pray.