

# 25 July 2021 – Ephesians 3

## BIBLE READING

Ephesians 3:1-21

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; 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. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, along with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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

## MESSAGE – The mystery of the gospel

I wonder what sorts of mysteries attract your attention.

Is it the murder mysteries that seem so popular on TV?

Is it the mystery of when our lives will return to ‘normal’ and if they ever will?

Is it the mystery of why our government is so reluctant to act on climate change when the consequences of not doing so seem so obvious?

In the passage we heard from Ephesians, the word ‘**mystery**’ occurs four times. Unlike the mysteries that human wisdom can unravel, the mystery of the gospel that Paul speaks about has been revealed only by God.

What is this mystery?

Based on what has already been revealed in this letter, the mystery of the gospel has several elements that humans would never have grasped ...

- That **all people** – Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, female and male – are invited to share in its blessing and become part of the family of God
- This blessing comes by **grace** – it is a gift – and not something earned by following certain rules or laws
- The blessing is made possible through the **death of the Messiah** or Christ, that is, through Jesus
- It is through the **church**, the so-called body of Christ, the new humanity formed by Christ's mission, that this mystery is being made known to the world

According to Paul, these are the key elements of the mystery of the gospel that have been part of God's plan and purposes for eons, but only revealed through Jesus and through the apostles such as Paul. Whether you realise it or not, we are all actors in this great divine mystery.

Now just as we may question the Federal Government over its handling of the Covid vaccination program – with its narrow choice of vaccines, the slow and laid back delivery schedule, the lack of urgency in vaccinating key workers and the mixed messaging – so also we might question what sort of plan God has in making the mystery of the gospel known if God is relying on **the church** to make it happen ...

Down through the centuries, the church as a whole has shown itself to be divided and divisive, to be easily distracted and corrupted, prone to mixed messages, often more interested in its own survival and glory than in sharing the gospel and at times showing itself to be unworthy of its high calling.

All of these criticisms are fair ... yet they all look on the church as a **human institution**, run and organised by fallible humans. To our shame, the church as a whole has become largely irrelevant to many of our neighbours and friends who regard our beliefs as little more than superstition and our practices as kindly but, frankly, a little weird.

But Paul doesn't understand the church in purely human terms.

Look at some of the descriptions he uses for the church in this letter ...

- The **body of Christ** ... the hands and feet and heart of Christ in the world
- The **bride of Christ** ... who enjoys an intimate and loving relationship with Christ
- The **family or household of God** ... loved and welcomed and named by God
- The **dwelling place of God** ... a living temple not made of bricks and mortar but made of our lives and our worship

So while our neighbours may think of the church as irrelevant or a curiosity, Paul wants us to think rather differently. He wants us to see ourselves as God's chosen people, being formed and grown together by God's Spirit, and intimately connected with Jesus who gives us our distinct shape and purpose.

We're to be a signpost to our neighbours of God's love and grace, a living breathing example of what humanity can be when we truly accept every person and offer hospitality, when we forgive one another and love one another, and live in peace and with hope. That's Paul's vision for the church.

Having given us this grand vision, Paul lowers his gaze and makes it personal. Sharing this mystery of

the gospel has not made Paul popular but rather has landed him in prison, where he is suffering. Paul considers himself an apostle and a leading figure in the emerging church, but he also sees himself as a **servant** and the least among the saints. Rather than false modesty, Paul's attitude reflects the attitude of Jesus and his teaching that those who want to be great must be a servant of all and must be prepared to lay down their lives, even as Jesus laid down his life.

How we live each and every day and how we relate to each other matters for followers of Jesus ... and Paul will have plenty to say about these personal matters in the second half of the letter.

Keeping it personal, I wonder how Paul might view the progress of the Uniting Church and our congregations at Croydon and Croydon North? I hope that Paul would commend us for our inclusive approach, as we welcome everybody to our worship services and reach out to our communities through our various ministries of compassion and hospitality. Perhaps Paul would be pleased that at this week's Assembly meeting – the national gathering of the Uniting Church across Australia – we elected a young, second generation Tongan woman, Charissa Suli, to be the next President of the Uniting Church.

But perhaps Paul would also want us to see more clearly that as the church we are an integral part of God's bigger plan. We are to be a witness to the various powers that operate in the world that there is an alternative story to tell which runs counter to the dominant narratives that our society tells us about what's important in life. The alternative is focused on the person, story and message of Jesus, through whom we have access to God ... which leads to the remarkable prayer that finishes off the first half of the letter.

Paul prays a lot. Prayer seems to come so easily and naturally to Paul ... much more easily than it does to many of us. He begins the letter with prayer, he finishes the letter with prayer and now having set out the mystery of the gospel he prays once more. This prayer is for the church in Ephesus ... but it's a prayer that he could well pray for us as well, whenever we feel weak or inadequate or uncertain about the future. It's a bold prayer whose focus is on God and what God can do in us and for us.

Paul seems to have a different perspective to us, a bigger vision of who God is and what God can do. God is the **Father**, the **Creator** of every family and every creature, whether on earth or in heaven. This God is both loving and powerful and is able to act **abundantly** – as in the story about the feeding of the 5000 that is one of the other readings for today – and who is able to do **far more than we ask** – **far more than we can even imagine** – and who is working through Christ and through the church. This is the God we are privileged to have access to through prayer.

Paul asks four things for the Jesus followers in Ephesus ... that I also pray for all of us. Let us pray together now ...

God our Father, Creator of the heavens and the earth, the one who acts powerfully,

- May we be strengthened in the depths of our being, with power from your Spirit, your presence, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead
- May Christ dwell more and more in our hearts by faith as we are grounded in his love
- May you show us and help us to grasp the endless dimensions of Christ's great love for us ... its breadth, length, height and depth
- May we be filled, then, with your presence, your power and your love so that our lives might bring you glory. Amen.