

“IN IT TOGETHER – 3”

Hope and Power

Ephesians 1:15-23

We're continuing to make our way through this letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding area – a letter encouraging and affirming these fairly recent followers of Jesus as they tried to live out their new-found faith in a culture that was very different in pretty well every way from that which had been modelled by Jesus and to which they had been called. The community of disciples of Jesus – the people of God from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds – were called to live out the values of the Kingdom of God and point people to a better way to live, a way to get the very best out of life as God had wanted in the very beginning, before evil and sin started to distort and pervert God's good creation.

Paul – who was in prison in Rome – has greeted his readers – both Ephesians and others, as this letter was going to be taken by his colleague Tychicus to other churches in the region – and has expressed his praise to God in the opening sentences of this letter. In fact, he got rather carried away with his praise and, as we saw last time we looked at this, vv3-14 are one long, excited sentence of almost incoherent thanksgiving to God for what has come about through his eternal will, which was put into action by the work of his Son and sealed with the warranty of the Holy Spirit.

Now, Paul pauses for breath in his dictation and then goes on to tell them that he pray for them – indeed, not just *that* he prays for the, but *what* he prays for them. In Paul's life, as in all God's people's lives, praise and prayer go hand in hand. And this is what Paul prays for all Christians – these are the things he really considers to be important in the lives of the followers of Jesus. Remember, this letter is going to be read by Christians in several other churches, so it's not just for the Ephesians. And if you take a look some time at the opening chapters of some of Paul's other letters – *Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians* – you'll see very similar things there, too. So it's a fairly safe assumption, I think, that he would want to say the same things today if, for example, he ever wrote a letter to the Christians in Lichfield. What he says here is for us: this needs to be heard by us here in the West Midlands of the 21st century just as much as by that little group of people in the Turkey of the first century.

And notice, too, that this isn't a prayer for healing or for help in particular difficulties. Paul is not responding to specific concerns in that sense. Nor is it a prayer for material blessings – that these people might become more wealthy or more influential or more important in their community. It is a prayer for spiritual blessings, for a deepening of their Christian experience and, thus, a greater effectiveness in living out the life of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the Kingdom of Imperial Roman power. Paul prays for their general development as followers of Jesus and for a clearer realisation of what it is all about.

We'd do well to note that and to emulate it in our own prayers as well. Our practice, so often, is to pray for other people to be helped in particular situations – for healing, for help overcoming specific obstacles, for peace or comfort or whatever – but how often do we pray for our fellow Christians to deepen their experience of God, to grow in their knowledge and love of Jesus, to know the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives day by day? As I've suggested before, why not use the Church List to pray such things for two or three people a day from this fellowship? (And keep it up, otherwise the Adams, Arden-Whites and Badcocks will get all the blessing and the people beginning with W will miss out!) Anyway, let's look at three things from this prayer that Paul prays for the Ephesians, the wider Asian community of Christians and, I believe, for us today.

1. **KNOW GOD BETTER** (v17)

Paul "*keeps asking*" – it is his continual prayer – that we might experience the Holy Spirit bringing us wisdom and revelation, opening our eyes to possibilities – indeed, realities – about God and his ways. He wants Christians to "*know God better*", to appreciate more and more of his greatness, to deepen our relationship with him. I'm sure most, if not all, of us here this morning would claim to know God in some way – some of you are just starting out on that journey; some of you are many, many years into it; some of you have spent time studying about it all at college or university or seminary. But none of us know him completely. We all need to know him better, to grow in our relationship with him. There is always so much more of him to experience. I picked up a t-shirt in the Trespass sale a couple of weeks ago: it was a good quality t-shirt and was a fraction of the original price and had bikes on the front – unmissable, really. But the slogan on it is "*Go further!*" Appropriate for an aging cyclist like myself, but even more appropriate for an aging Christian like myself – "*Go further!*" Get to know God better and more deeply, go further into his loving purposes.

You see, we cannot stay where we are in a relationship. Think about a good marriage or a great friendship. They get better over time, don't they? – as we talk together, learn more about each other, grow into one another's life and space. The more time you spend with someone, the deeper it all goes.

Spend more time with God. That doesn't mean that you have to be extending your quiet time or daily devotions or whatever you call it each day. It mean becoming more conscious and aware that God is with you wherever you are and whatever you're doing. Pausing every now and then to acknowledge that God is there, that he is with you in that situation.

Talk to God. You might call it prayer, even. Get used to speaking to him during the day. You might want to do that out loud at times. Don't worry if other people hear – they'll just assume you're on some kind of hands-free device with an earpiece! It might just be that you are consciously aware that you are thinking a conversation with God. Tell him what's on your mind. Bring him your prayers for others. And pause every now and then to hear what he might want to say to you.

And he might want to communicate with you through another person, or through the Bible. Get into the habit of reading the Bible and thinking about what you read, reflecting on it – even discussing it with others at a housegroup or in a conversation over coffee. Take some time, if you're into reading, to learn more about God through other books; or listen to stuff on-line, maybe while you're sitting in traffic on the daily commute (you can get the whole Bible on-line or on a CD). Think about it as training. You'd do it for your job: why not do it for your faith? I was talking to a woman at an event earlier this week. She'd shelled out £5,000 to do a Masters degree in theology with a view to ordination (which didn't happen, in the end, and she is now in another frontline ministry), but her diocese couldn't work out why she'd be prepared to fund herself through that. She's been a pretty successful business woman and she said that she paid out up to £1,000 a day for seminars to improve her business skills: wasn't her faith even more important than that? Do all you can to get to know God better.

2. KNOW THE HOPE TO WHICH YOU ARE CALLED (v18)

Getting to know God better is a pretty good goal in and of itself, but Paul moves on to say that this will help you to get to know the hope that you have as a follower of Jesus. Sometimes this world can seem a rather hope-less place, can't it? That's partly due to the media's preoccupation with bad news, but it can all look a bit bleak very often. Talking to some of the Americans about their last presidential election, they expressed their frustration that neither of the main candidates gave any reason for hope. When it comes to Brexit – or even the possibility of another General Election – many people here might feel the same in what on many levels looks like a lose/lose situation, a choice between a party that is riven with internal bickering, hasn't got any clearly defined policies and doesn't give a monkeys about the vast majority of the population and a party that is riven with internal bickering, hasn't got any clearly defined policies and doesn't give a monkeys about the vast majority of the population! And look round at a society struggling to cope on shrinking resources, at numbers of people unable to get by with their income level, at rising levels of crime in some areas, at the fragmentation and discord caused by what we foolishly call “social” media, at the limited aspirations of many young people.

And what hope is there for anything beyond this life? Maybe it's because most people don't have any hope for the eternal future that we have such a hope-less present. If there's nothing beyond the here and now, why bother anyway? If this is all there is, let's eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. And who cares about anyone else?

But God has called us to a hope for better things. There is something beyond this life, something to look forward to, something that is worth waiting for and worth working towards now. God is going to restore his Kingdom, to put right the wrongs that have come about through the presence of evil in his world. Through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus that process has already started. It is all worth it! And it's grasping that hope that means we can deal with what is going on now.

It was that hope that inspired Paul. It was that hope that kept the little groups of new Christians going in Ephesus and Rome and Philippi and Antioch when there was so much opposition to them. Read a book like *The Heavenly Man*, by Brother Yun, a Chinese pastor who has spent a fair bit of time in prison. I'm reading a novel called *Silence* by a Japanese Christian called Shusaku Endo about the persecution of Christians in 17th century Japan. (It's been made into a film by Martin Scorsese.) Think about the songs of the black slaves in America and their expression of the hope of heaven. It was the hope that God had given them of things to come that kept them all going.

Because, you see, in the New Testament hope is not some vague aspiration, some wish for a better outcome. It is a sure and certain hope. We know that things will be OK because, as we said just now, Jesus has already won the decisive victory. There is no going back. Evil has been defeated and what we see around us now is simply the frustrated thrashings of the forces of evil trying to do as much damage as they can before their inevitable complete destruction. Paul writes here that we need to know "*the hope to which God has called you, the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints*". This is an "*inheritance*". God has already signed it, as we saw last week, and it is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. You cannot lose with Jesus!

And if you know you have that to look forward to, that eternity safe and secure enjoying the riches of God's Kingdom rule, that's going to change your view of life now. It's not simply pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die. You can approach what is going on now with a sense of optimism because you know that nothing can ultimately harm you. You can smile through the most difficult of situations – not easy, I know – but you know deep down that God is watching over you and will one day bring you into his presence for ever, where you can enjoy not the meagre pickings of a limited legacy, but the "*riches of the glorious inheritance*". You can look forward to "*every spiritual blessing in Christ*", to "*the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us*", to "*the grace which he has freely given us in the One he loves*" (all

in vv3-14). If you don't have that hope, my friends, then pray for it – and get praying that others will have it too.

3. **KNOW HIS INCOMPARABLY GREAT POWER** (v19)

Power was very important in Ephesus – as it was in most of the places where this letter would have been read. But Ephesus was an important centre, a significant city in the mighty Roman Empire. So they knew all about civic power, about legal power, about imperial power. And they also know about spiritual power. Ephesus was a great centre of idol worship, full of impressive temples and shrines to the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon. Towering over them all was the Temple of Artemis, devoted to the goddess of love, staffed by temple prostitutes and surrounded by all kinds of businesses profiting from the constant stream of worshippers to the area. You can read a bit more about that aspect of Ephesus in *Acts 19*.

For these new Christians, such power could have seemed overwhelming. In a culture where there was still something of the attitude of “My god's bigger than your god”, they may have been a bit threatened as they met in their little group in someone's house – no great numbers, no impressive worship centre, no merchandising spin-offs. Indeed, they may well have felt that Jesus just wasn't as great a god to follow as some of the others, who had a bit of history behind them as well as some very fanatical followers. But Paul prays that they will get to know “*his incomparably great power*”. God is immeasurably greater than any other.

In fact, Paul lays it on really thick again. In v19 he uses four different words for power, the words translated in the NIV as “*power, working, mighty, strength*”. The Greek words, should you be interested, are *dunamis* (from which we get such English words as “dynamic” and “dynamo”), *energeia* (“energy”), *kratos* (as in “autocrat” or “plutocrat”) and *ischys*. He's really trying to emphasise that there is real power in God that has been demonstrated in Jesus.

It was the power of God shown in the crucifixion of Jesus that broke the power of evil as Jesus acted as a kind of lightning conductor for all that evil could throw at the world. And it was shown in the resurrection as Jesus went through death and out the other side to break the power of death itself, the last great fear of fallen humanity. It was shown as Jesus was exalted to God's “*right hand in the heavenly realms*”.

Jesus is now exalted above everything and everyone else. As Paul puts it, he is “*far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come.*” That is impressive! He is above the rule of Imperial Rome, above the authority of any human agency, above the powers represented by all those marble statues and elaborate temples. And just for good measure, Paul adds that it’s not just what you can see now – it’s any power anywhere for all time and eternity. Don’t you want to be on his side in any battle that might brew up?

We may not be quite as fearful of persecution, or even of death, today – at least not in our part of the world. But there is still a very great sense in which many Christians, part of a relatively small minority in our contemporary culture, feel fearful. Some feel intimidated by the intellectual heavyweights who are so often ranged against us – the Dawkins and Hitchens brigade. I recently picked up a little book called *The Quotable Atheist*, full of quotations bolstering the case for atheism from all kinds of well-known figures. Their arrogance is astonishing and their arguments are full of holes. Jesus Christ is far greater than them. Some feel under pressure from all kinds of legislation which the more hysterical sections of the Christian media see as a concerted conspiracy to destroy Christianity. Most of it is nothing of the sort – it’s just a lot of misguided stuff from people ignorant of what Christians actually believe. Jesus Christ is far greater than them. Some people are afraid of being ridiculed if they mention their faith to friends or family. The vast majority of people are quite happy to hear what you have to say about your faith – and some really do wish you’d share it with them. And anyway, Jesus Christ is far greater than them.

Everything is under Christ’s feet. He is the all-conquering hero – and also the all-loving friend. He has the kind of power that you couldn’t even begin to imagine and he has used it to overcome the forces of evil, death and hell. You just need to grab hold of that, to accept it and live in the light of it. That’s why Paul writes that it is “*for us who believe*”. Believe in Jesus and you can tap into that. You can tap into that power that can overcome temptation, overcome hopelessness, overcome injustice, overcome opposition.

That power, as we have said, was demonstrated on the cross at Calvary, in the empty tomb, in the glorious ascension into heaven. And since Jesus went off to sit at the Father’s right hand, it continues to be demonstrated by his body here on earth. His body here on earth is the Church, is you and me, folks. He has left us to continue his mission. That’s why we need to work together in unity – as Paul goes on to say in the rest of this letter. That’s why we each need to get to **know God better**, to get to **know the hope** that he has given us, and get to **know the power of Jesus** in our lives, and in our worship and witness together. Pray that for yourself and for those around you.

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Questions to think about and discuss

- 1) How could we pray more effectively for each other?
- 2) What does it mean to "*get to know God better*"? How do you do that?
- 3) What makes the Christian hope superior to any other hope? How can we be sure?
- 4) If we insist of Jesus' power being greater than any other, aren't we just saying "My god's bigger than your god" ?
- 5) How have you experienced God's power in your life?
- 6) How do we communicate this to those who don't yet know Jesus? What would make it relevant to them?