

**“IN IT TOGETHER – 6”**

**The Open Secret**  
***Ephesians 3:1-13***

At the Jazz Service a couple of weeks ago, we mentioned William Booth’s strategy with the Salvation Army: that popular music could be used to draw people in to hear the Gospel. The brass bands which are so closely identified with the Salvation Army were very much part of that – music that was played and arranged in a style which was contemporary and accessible was used as a vehicle for words which declared the love of God. In the early 1960s, the powers that be at the Salvation Army, the heirs of the vision of William Booth, realised that it wasn’t brass bands that were capturing the imagination of young people, but a new kind of popular music, so they set up a pop group, based around a talented young musician called Joy Webb. They called the group *The Joystings* and they were soon making their debut appearance on television, not on a music show, but with Cliff Michelmore (remember him?) on a current affairs programme. Someone from EMI saw the programme and they were offered a recording contract and went on to have two modest hits in 1964 – *On A Starry Night*, which got to No. 34 that Christmas, and earlier in the year at No.32, *It’s An Open Secret*.

Around twenty centuries before that, Paul was writing about “an open secret” in the passage we’ve just heard read from *Ephesians 3*. In this letter from his current imprisonment in Rome, Paul continues to try and encourage and inspire the new Christians – both Jewish and Gentile – meeting in their little groups in what is now Turkey. He’s having a bit of difficulty marshalling his thoughts, though, and his secretary to whom he is dictating this must have been getting very frustrated as the Apostle keeps going off on enthusiastic digressions which express his boundless enthusiasm for the heart of what he’s talking about – the grace of God. Chapter 3 sees him trying to pick up the thread that he started in *1:15*, but he suddenly takes off again and doesn’t get back to it until *3:14*.

What he breaks off for in this instance is to say something about why he is “*a prisoner of Jesus Christ for the sake of you Gentiles*”. (You’ll remember, I hope, that Paul is addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers, using “*we*” when he’s talking to the Jews and “*you*” when he means the Gentiles.) In chapter 2 we saw how Jews and Gentiles are brought together through the work of Jesus and “*in Jesus*” to become a “*new humanity*” (*2:15*), kicking off the process by which God is restoring all things to the way he originally wanted them to be when he created the world and before sin and evil got into it all to distort and pervert it. This, says Paul, is “*the mystery*” that has been made known to him. Notice that he doesn’t say that he discovered it, but that it was revealed to him. It’s not his doing. This is all following on from his amazing conversion in the road outside Damascus. For some reason, God chose to use Paul as the person who would start the communication of this message to the world. “*I got the inside story from God himself,*” is how *The Message* puts it.

Now, for us, a “mystery” is an enigma, a secret, something that is hidden. For Paul and the people of his culture “a mystery” was a truth into which a person was initiated, a secret teaching for the chosen ones in one of the various pagan cults of the time, cults that were known as “The Mystery Cults”. Adherents to these cults which worshipped various gods and goddesses would gradually be told about the secret teachings of the order and eventually be inducted into the “mysteries”. Paul’s taking that concept, but saying that, with God, these teachings – these “mysteries” – are now to be revealed to everyone. This is now “an open secret” for anyone and everyone to hear. No-one is excluded from finding out about what God’s will is.

From the very beginning, when it was obvious that the good creation he had brought into being was going to be spoiled by the presence of evil, God had a plan to deal with it. He knew that he would one day bring it all back to the way he wanted it. That plan had been kept under wraps until the coming of Jesus, but now it was out in the open, available and accessible to everyone. And that “everyone” includes both Jew and Gentile, who are now *“heirs together ... members together of one body, sharers together in the promise of Jesus”* (v6). Those eternal purposes of God have now been *revealed* – the Greek word is *apokalypsis*, from which we get our word “Apocalypse”, meaning “revelation” – and those purposes include the Gentiles. God had actually said that back in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, in such places as *Genesis 12:3* – *“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; **and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you**”* – but the Jewish people had forgotten or ignored or overlooked the bit about sharing their blessings. Now, though, through Jesus, God’s secret plan is unveiled at last. It’s all out in the open and God, through Paul and the other apostles, is inviting everyone to be a part of it.

So Paul’s calling is to proclaim this “open secret” to everyone, but particularly to the Gentiles. He is, as he says in v8, *“to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”*. This is something very special, something that should make a difference to the lives of all who hear it. It’s yet another reminder of the lavishness of God’s grace, of the abundance of his love. *“Unsearchable”* is a way of translating a word that means “unable to be tracked”, without any limits, boundless. God’s love is immense, infinite, overwhelming in its size and scope. You know if you stand at the top of a hill or a mountain looking out over a landscape that is vast and full of beauty, it’s just so wonderful you can’t take it in – I remember a moment in one of the series of *Top Gear* when three gobby blokes who basically ridiculed and trivialised pretty well everything that they saw arrived at the top of a ridge in Botswana as the sun was setting over the magnificent valley below them and they were actually speechless in wonder – that’s what we’re talking about here. God’s love and grace, demonstrated in the life and death and resurrection and glorification of Jesus, are just beyond anything we can even describe. And Paul has the task of trying to

communicate something of that to people who were still grovelling around in the world limited by evil and selfishness and human sin.

But that plan of God to get things back to what he intended, although not completely fulfilled (it won't be until Jesus returns again) has now been "*accomplished*" (v11): God has done what he needs to do to get things back on track. And, as one commentator puts it, "*The news is out – the gospel has gone viral*". Paul and the apostles have kicked off the proclamation of this amazing message, but God has even grander plans for its communication. And this is where Paul starts to get to the heart of what I think he is trying to say to these Ephesians, and the others who will read this letter in the other churches.

Look at what Paul writes in v10. This is absolutely key to what Paul wanted the mixed group of Jewish and Gentile believers to grasp and what is still so important for us today. "*[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.*" Paul is dead. The first apostles are dead. The first generation of believers are all dead. But God's "*manifold wisdom*" – the diverse, multi-faceted, pan-cultural, universal plan of God: the open secret – is to be proclaimed by the Church, by you and me.

This is immensely important – and not just to those who decry and denounce the Church, who think it gets in the way of the message, who believe that you can be a good Christian without the Church, who don't see any point identifying with the Church – God has decided that the Church is to be the vehicle for this open secret to be made known to a desperately needy world. And I do not believe that Paul is here talking just about the Church preaching and speaking the Gospel. I think Paul is saying that the very existence of the Church is a way of making known God's manifold wisdom. The Church stands as a prophetic witness, even to the spiritual powers, that God is at work in his world.

You see, what Paul is trying to drive home here and at other places in his letters and preaching, is that God is creating a new humanity out of a fractured and fragmented world – a new humanity in which Jews and Gentiles (representing the most significant division in that situation) are all included on equal terms – and the Church is to be the means of showing what that new humanity will be like. In other words, the Church is called to be a body of people who are united, with one foundation and one purpose, a community of love. In a broken world, the very presence of such a people points to a hope that is attainable, to a plan that is being fulfilled, to a new way of living that we start to enjoy now and which will continue into eternity.

There are all kinds of things that are not quite right with the Church in its universal, world-wide expression. There are all kinds of things that are not quite right with this local church – as people like to

point out from time to time, with varying degrees of venom. God's still working on us, but also *through* us. So do not diss the Church. Do not ignore it or reject it. Do not criticise it and try to do it down. This is God's intended means of showing the world what life should be like. Rather than moaning and criticising, do all that you can to show God's love in your relationships within the church. Bring peace where it is needed. Show love where it is needed. Work together with others to demonstrate that God is transforming you – and us – and that he can transform the lives of those as yet outside the church. Live out your faith in the church and through the church. Get involved in the life of the church and help us all do what we are called to do, as we meet together, eat together, learn together, study together, worship together, witness together, laugh and cry together. (Paul will give us some more help on how we do that in the coming chapters.)

God has called you to be part of his new humanity, his transformed society. And in doing that he has given you access to his amazing grace, to the “*unsearchable riches*” of Jesus. You have seen this “open secret”. You know what this mystery is. And that is all available to those around you – the people amongst whom you live and work and play each day. The secret is open to everyone. So let's not do anything to prevent others getting to find out about it. Let's not live in such a way that the church puts people off God rather than showing them what a great God we have. If we fail to make known and to demonstrate the effect of God's love to the world, to the community around us, then we are going against God's intention. This open secret is an amazing truth, so let us do all we can to show what a difference it can make amongst us here.

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God has decided that the Church is to be the vehicle for this open secret to be made known to a desperately needy world. Paul is saying that the very existence of the Church is a way of making known God's manifold wisdom. The Church stands as a prophetic witness, even to the spiritual powers, that God is at work in his world. The Church is called to be a body of people who are united, with one foundation and one purpose, a community of love. In a broken world, the very presence of such a people points to a hope that is attainable, to a plan that is being fulfilled, to a new way of living that we start to enjoy now and which will continue into eternity.

### **For reflection and discussion**

- 1) What do you understand by "mystery"? How did God actually reveal this mystery?
- 2) Why do you think people criticise the Church (from inside and out)? Is any of the criticism justified?
- 3) How can we begin to live together as God wants us to? What might need to change?
- 4) If God intended the Church to be his vehicle for making known his plan, why are there so many different versions of it around the world?
- 5) Do you feel you can approach God "*with freedom and confidence*" (v12)? Why/why not?