

## 8 January 2023; Ephesians 3:1-12; Epiphany; Pastor Fraser Pearce

A couple of weeks back I was in Indonesia  
Teaching Lutheran spirituality and theology  
To both young adults and pastors.  
We may not think of Indonesia as being a Christian country,  
And, indeed, I was woken very early in the morning  
By the Islamic call to prayer.  
But there are in fact many, many times more Lutherans in Indonesia  
Than in Australia, who worship, as they would say,  
Allah the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Now I was in Jakarta, which is a wonderfully foreign city,  
But I experienced real fellowship, real sharing,  
With Indonesian brothers and sisters in Christ.  
Although none of us are Jews by birth,  
We together share a common baptism into Christ:  
We are members of the same body,  
And God gives us a unity that is deeper  
Than the unity of ethnicity, or language, or social class, or gender.

Today I'm proclaiming Good News from God's word:  
Through the Gospel God is bringing together  
The different people of the world, now divided by sin,  
And that through the church he is revealing  
The rich variety of his wisdom –  
A wisdom that lifts us up to new life with God.

Let's listen to how today's reading begins:

**This is the reason...** For what reason?

Whenever a reading starts this way we have to pause.

St Paul has already been saying something,

We are coming into the flow of an argument.

So what has St Paul been saying?

We'll if you go back a few verses, you hear these words: **So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.**

St Paul here is talking especially to gentile Christians,  
To people who did not call out on the God of Abraha, Isaac, and Jacob,  
But who through faith in Christ are no longer strangers  
To the ways of God, or the community of his people.  
Rather, they now truly belong  
As members of the household of God.

So, St Paul says: **This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—**

St Paul's preaching of the Gospel to all people  
Has got him into trouble, not just with his own Jewish people,  
But also with the Roman authorities.  
St Paul, we should note, is writing this letter from *captivity*:  
But this is not a sign to him that God has abandoned him,  
Or that his proclamation of the Gospel is not working.  
On the contrary, St Paul does not see his imprisonment  
As a hinderance to his life of faith  
Or his effectiveness as an apostle:  
God is God, and is not held back by apparently human barriers.  
In fact, it is at this point in his letter,  
As he acknowledges the reality of his captivity,  
That he changes track to talk about not what he is suffering,  
But to tell the Ephesian Christians what his continuing role is,  
And what it means for them.

Listen to what St Paul writes: **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.**

St Paul is getting into his new theme:  
Although he is a prisoner, and outwardly powerless,  
And even, from a worldly pint of view, less than a nobody,  
He is, in God's kingdom, someone commissioned by God  
To reveal a mystery to God's people,  
A mystery that we receive and hand on together today  
In Australia, in Indonesia, wherever the Gospel is proclaimed.

This is what St Paul says: **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.**

He starts by declaring the mystery,  
The thing that is hidden, but that remains strange and unexpected  
Even as it is revealed,  
He starts by declaring the mystery that the Gentiles,  
Those people who are not Jews by birth,  
Have become sharers in the promises of God made to the patriarchs,  
And more than this, that they are members of the same body,  
The body of the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who reigns with the Father.

Listen to how St Paul goes on: **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;**

St Paul frankly acknowledges that he is unworthy of his commission.  
I expect St Paul was tempted to pride as he considered his position,  
But we know from his other letters that God taught St Paul,  
Not just through calling him when he was a persecutor of the church,  
And not just through allowing him to suffer persecution himself,  
But also through allowing him to suffer real weakness and need  
In his daily life, we know that God taught St Paul the gift of humility,  
Of knowing that God's grace is sufficient.  
So St Paul here is not big noting himself,  
But in humility handing on what God has given him to proclaim.  
And it's at this point that St Paul  
Further reveals two remarkable aspects of the mystery.

First he says: **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.**

Did you hear what St Paul said?  
That God makes the rich variety of his own wisdom known  
Through the church.

What was the church in St Paul's day?

A tiny, apparently utterly insignificant gathering

Of people who, in worldly terms, had no power or influence.

But what they did have was a unity that shines out in the darkness:

Not a unity that comes from sharing a skin colour or language,

Not a unity that comes from having a similar standard of living,

Or even what many call today the same gender identity,

No, they had a unity in receiving mercy from God,

And having the confidence to approach God together as one people.

Did you notice, by the way, the cosmic dimension to the church?

It's not that the church shows the wisdom of God to people,

But rather that it shows the wisdom of God **to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.**

St Paul is saying that what happens as God draws his people together,

Even here at Bethlehem Sunday by Sunday,

Reveals who he is to powers that we can only imagine.

Hearing this can help us understand more deeply what is going on

When we say that we praise God together with angels and archangels

And with all the company of heaven.

And this takes us to the second aspect of the mystery,

And the last point of today's sermon:

**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.**

In whom we have access to God: through whom we approach God.

Whatever our mother tongue, or culture, or skin colour,

In Christ we together approach God with confidence

Because we know that in Christ

We have the mercy of God revealed to us,

And we gather together week by week here at Bethlehem,

And in unity with Christians in Indonesia,

And from all over the world, and with all the saints who have gone before us,

Together with angels and archangels, and the whole company of heaven,

And God's wisdom shines out

As we love each other with the same love that God has shown us

In Christ Jesus our Lord. In his name. **Amen.**