

Introduction to the series

In our sermons for the next six weeks, we are going to read a letter from St Paul to the Ephesians. It is one of the medium length letters, of six chapters. Paul was in prison when he wrote, probably in Rome. He had been to Ephesus twice. We know about that from the book of Acts, a short first visit (Acts 18:19-21) followed by one of three years (19:1-20:31). Ephesus was a busy port, with a temple of Diana. This letter does not have all the personal greetings some of them do, and so some people have thought it was always meant as a general letter, which could go to several churches in the region. As such it is easier to think of it as a letter to us. Perhaps you'd like to read it when you get home, or this week.

Introduction to today

We begin at chapter one. You might like to look at it in the service sheet. The portion of the letter, v.3-14, which Gillian read for us, is all one very long sentence in Greek, with no punctuation. People who like it say it is like the overture of an opera with lots of hints of what is to follow, or a golden kaleidoscope full of shining pieces. Someone who perhaps liked it a bit less said it was like a racehorse galloping off at full speed. It's like a creed because it's all about believing, so it has a lot of doctrine in it. It is also like a hymn because it is expressed very joyfully, Blessed be God. There is even a refrain - to the praise of his glory. There is so much in it that it is hard to know what to pick out. It is primarily an overview passage. I have decided to look at the three timespans which are mentioned. Those three are:

Before the foundation of the world

Our time

The fullness of time

1. Before the foundation of the world

Paul speaks of the activity of God the Father 'before the foundation of the world'. v.4 It might remind us of the first chapter of John's gospel - in the beginning- or of Genesis - in the beginning. It is a kind of time which is not historical. When we read verses like this we are talking about the mysterious transcendent God, who is other than us, and so we can't fully comprehend it. In Ephesians Paul speaks of the 'heavenly places'. That is outside our geography. The kind of time in 'before the foundation of the world' is outside our history. What we can grasp is that Paul believed God had a purpose even then to choose us, to adopt us, to draw us '**in Christ**' into holiness, into living in love with God. God's purpose is kind - Paul talks of his good pleasure, his glorious grace. Verses like this remind us of the universal scope claimed by our Christian faith and should expand our thinking about God.

2. Our time

Paul also speaks about events which can be located in our time

We are much more used to thinking about what can be located in history. He refers to the death of Christ, his blood being shed, which was a historical event. He refers to the experience of the Ephesians - you heard the word of truth, you believed in him, you set your hope on Christ, you were marked with the Spirit. These are events of faith but they are ones which we can place and which had witnesses. Many of us, in our day, will have similar experiences; we set our hope on Christ, we were baptised or confirmed, or in some other way marked with the Spirit. As Christians we have

universal truths which we believe but also particular - God **in Christ** is part of our own life story. In the next few weeks we'll go on to look in more detail at what it means to be 'in Christ'.

3. The fullness of time

The third timespan Paul writes about is the fullness of time,(v.10) It is the other side from 'before the foundation of the world'. Like the first timespan, we get stuck if we try to locate this time in history. It looks ahead to a consummation, and has that sense of all being finally ready. St Paul believed that there is a plan for the fullness of time, that the world we see, and the history we know, is not just careering out of control, but that somehow God will gather up all things **in Christ**, things in heaven and things on earth. Often the apocalypse - which the Jews were keen on, is presented in terms of doom, destruction and judgement whereas this is notable for its optimistic tone. The hope here is strong, and forward looking. As such, I find it very encouraging at times when the fragmentation of the world is depressing. I am not alone in having lived in several different countries, and in having my parents dead. Many of us live separated from those whom we love, and we long to have them all with us. The great gathering speaks to that longing, and gives us hope; there will be a time when we have that sense of completeness. When we worship we have a foretaste of that, because we are joined to God's people however imperfectly.

Conclusion

What then can we take away from this first look at Ephesians? We can place our own life in Christ in a very wide context, from 'before the foundation of the world' to 'the fullness of time when all will be gathered up'. And we can be very thankful.