

SERMON 25.2.18 By Joy Dipple

Readings: Ephesians 1: 15-23 and Mark 8: 31-38

Without a Christian view of the world it is so easy to see it in a very limited way – to measure our value just in terms of how successful we are – our level of education, what jobs we have, and how self-sufficient we can become – ambitions that are actually quite admirable, because we don't want to be a drain on those around us. We want to be valued, successful – and we also want to be safe. We don't like to be vulnerable or out of control. We fear things, or people who can do us harm; and it is very easy to be drawn into the negativity of the news that fills our TV screens and newspapers each day.

But how different our perception can be when we see the world through the eyes of our Christian faith, when we really grasp gospel truth. We become aware of the bigger picture of what God is doing in and through us in His world, and how much He cares for us, irrespective of our level of human success. It leads us forward into a greater desire to worship, as we reflect on the big picture of God's purposes for His world.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is packed with insights that create in us a sense of awe and wonder. Paul is full of praise as he sets the scene in the earlier verses before today's reading. He speaks of God's chosen people, us, who have become God's adopted children, those who have been redeemed through the blood of Christ on the Cross, those for whom there is forgiveness, a pouring out of God's mercy and grace, lavished on us in abundance, as we look forward to a redeemed world where both heaven and earth come together under the leadership of Christ; and for those of us who believe there is the seal of the indwelling Holy Spirit which serves as a guarantee of our inheritance in God's kingdom.

It is mind boggling stuff and is one of the reasons why this letter to the Ephesians is so powerful.

It is a whole life vision, which, when grasped, explains why Christians become willing to give their all in pursuit of Christ.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus calls on his followers to take up their own cross – to make a stand when necessary against the world around them, to deny themselves, even to the point of death; and we can understand that willingness as people grasp the full extent of the Gospel message.

The concept of Jesus having to face the Cross was something Peter couldn't grasp initially. Jesus rebuked him for his limited perception – Peter was seeing through human eyes instead of through the lens of God's bigger picture. To be crucified was the epitome of shame. It was an act which Satan thought would destroy Jesus once and for all. It was the worst Satan could do, but he hadn't counted on the resurrection power of God. Death could not hold Jesus, and neither would it hold Jesus' followers in their willingness to walk the way of the Cross as well if necessary.

Returning to today's reading from Ephesians we see Paul's prayers for the believers, prayers that are of equal importance to us here today. Paul has a compelling vision of how our own salvation is linked to God's widest purposes – the salvation of the whole world when Christ will have absolute rule over everything. He wants the Ephesians, and us by association, to grasp the full extent of Christ's power and authority over the whole world – a vision that causes us to give Christ the worth, the honour, that is due to Him. Paul prays for the Ephesians to have that full revelation. The world will ultimately be transformed, redeemed, and we will be welcomed into that transformation as followers of Christ. It may seem too distant, too unbelievable, but nevertheless it is a picture of God's purposes that permeate right through scripture, from the moment of creation, through the Fall, to its final redeemed state under Christ.

The big picture is a compelling vision, but secondly Paul prays for God's people to enter into the reality of that vision, to know God better and to live for Him, under the hope of our eternal inheritance. Paul prays for us to experience the power of God that is within us through the Holy Spirit, and he says something that I find incredible, namely that that power is the same as the power that raised Christ from the dead. The thought that that level of power is available to us through the Holy Spirit is astonishing but it is what Paul is wanting the Ephesians to be aware of.

It is the same power of God that enabled Jesus to exercise control over nature, e.g. in the stilling of the storm, and to perform miraculous healings.

When we pray for others we pray for Christ's power to work in the lives of those people. To pray is part of our remit as Christians. We are called to pray at all times and in all circumstances, and we mustn't forget that God has also equipped the medical world in the healing process too.

Many here can testify how prayer has helped in their own lives and that of others. But God's power is also inherent in ways that aren't confined to the miraculous. Indeed, if we limit it to the spectacular we may be disappointed. Even Jesus didn't heal everyone who was in need, and if we just see Jesus as a miracle worker then we fail to see the full extent of His ministry.

God's power is also about divine forgiveness, and we can know that forgiveness. Jesus was accused of blasphemy because he dared to say He had the power of God to forgive sin. When the paralytic was brought to Him Jesus said his sins were forgiven. Then to prove that He had that power He gave the man physical healing too.

Each week as we come to church we are assured of the power of God's forgiveness. It is readily ours as we acknowledge our own sinfulness.

But power is also seen in the ability to endure the way of the Cross, as we cope with life's difficulties. In Christ we see His ability to remain silent and resolute as He walked the road to the crucifixion. He was tempted in the wilderness to use power in a supernatural way, power that was His to use, but He resisted – a foretaste of the resistance He would have to exercise in His trial and death on the Cross.

The power of God ranges from the ability to endure pain, right through to the miraculous power that resulted in Christ's resurrection. Let us be aware of that breadth of understanding.

For the Ephesians and for us there is the vision of seeing the big picture of God, and to know the power of the Holy Spirit within us. But thirdly we need to have that whole life vision of seeing God's rule in our own everyday lives, as we take on board the fact that God's authority governs everything, a reality that will one day be evident to all.

We come together in corporate worship to be reminded of God's big picture for the world, as history becomes His story, and for us to have the opportunity to be refreshed with God's resurrection power. I pray, as Paul did, that we may be inspired with that insight to live out this vision in our own everyday lives – in our homes, work places and community, and to give God the glory that is due to Him each day. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is no less important for us in the here and now, today.

