

A warm Welcome to Worship on Sunday 25th July

Words of Welcome

Opening Song Hymn 198 All Are Welcome verses 1, 4, 5.

1 Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell
how hearts learn to forgive;
built of hopes and dreams and visions,
rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
*All are welcome,
all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.*

4 Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:

5 Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed
as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter

Opening Prayer

Dear God,

Summon us today,
To a wider love
To hold our neighbours,
Those who are strange to us
Those who have been cold to us

Summon us today, Oh God
To a deeper love
That is gently curious beyond surface conversation
That perceives the pain beneath the facade

That discerns with a truer wisdom

Summon us today, Oh God
To a longer love
That walks the extra mile
That waits beyond the instant
That hopes beyond the horizon

And summon us today
To the love
Which is you
Who are love

We bless you that in Jesus Christ
You showed us love
You gave us love
You teach us love

We praise you, God who is love

Forgive us our sins
Where we have hated
Where we have gossiped
Where we have let our prejudices lie to us
Forgive us all our sins we pray

And in Jesus Christ
The loving one
Let us know we are forgiven,

AMEN

Reading Ephesians 3:14-21

A prayer for the Ephesians

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family^[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Song Hymn 551 In Heavenly Love Abiding

In heavenly love abiding,
no change my heart shall fear;
and safe is such confiding,
for nothing changes here:
the storm may roar without me,
my heart may low be laid;
but God is round about me,
and can I be dismayed?

Wherever he may guide me,
no want shall turn me back;
my Shepherd is beside me,
and nothing can I lack:
his wisdom ever waketh,
his sight is never dim,
he knows the way he taketh,
and I will walk with him.

Green pastures are before me,
which yet I have not seen;
bright skies will soon be o'er me,
where darkening clouds have been.
My hope I cannot measure:
my path to life is free;
my Saviour has my treasure,
and he will walk with me.

Sermon

The Breadth and Length and Height and Depth

We are continuing our series in the writings of that most remarkable apostle of the early Church, Paul - other than Jesus, the person who has done more to shape the life and thinking of the Church over the last 2000 years.

This week we are in Ephesians.

Ephesians is sometimes called the "Queen of the Epistles". When you read it's first two chapters in particular you can see why - it is full of language about

what Christ has done for his people, again and again we read of all that Christ has done for his people, in the language of verse 3, "who has blessed us with with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

There is talk again and of Christ gathering us into God in the dying on the cross, making one new human in place of the two - conquering all human division, of this plan sitting outside time itself, before time, and time and again the richness of God, the riches of his grace, and the riches which God is going to share in the life to come.

Only in chapter 3, after all this has been expounded do we discover something striking about the man who is writing this. This serene, optimistic, hopeful, language - language about what God is going to do, but also what God has already done for his people.

We discover that he is sitting in a prison cell, and we cannot but be struck by the contrast between this regal language, and the depths that Paul currently finds himself in.

I have been to a number of prisons in the world - I have been to Castle Huntly near here, an open prison with its meeting place - it might have been an open prison, but I was still glad to be able to go.

More threatening still was Saughton in Edinburgh, big security features, the inmates I was with in special coloured jump suits to show that they were special protection prisoners

I remember the threat of the great Victorian edifice in the Eastend of Glasgow, Barlinnie, Bar-L, or the Big Hoose;

The worst prison I ever visited was Trivandrum prison in South India, a horror of a place

And it is the last of these that I think might approach the experience of Paul, in prison in Rome or possibly Caeserae, a horrific place, in chains, poor water or food, fear of punishment from the guards, treated as scum of the earth.

And yet it is here that he writes these most serene thoughts, as if he is able to perceive a deeper reality which flies in the face of all his depressing circumstances.

I think of a story I heard recently of a man called Hyab Johannes. This is how I described his story recently in a letter to a friend:

Hyab's story was that in the mid 2010s, after having been trafficked himself from Eritrea to Sudan, Hyab had sought asylum in Egypt. This had led to him speaking out about people trafficking there and being arrested. He found himself in a dungeon in the lowest part of a hotel, in complete darkness. In the darkness he could hear another man praying - his name was Alex. Alex had lost all track of time but it turned out he had been there since 1999 - this was now 2016. They

spoke for a month, Alex explaining his story that he had been picked up during a border skirmish when he was in the Ethiopian army and had been completely forgotten about.

Because he was connected, Hyab was released, but had been asked by Alex to be remembered. This is a promise that Hyab kept and campaigned to have Alex released. This included contact with Alex's mother who was convinced that her son was dead, and shocked discover that he was alive but in prison in Egypt. Through Hyab's efforts, Alex was eventually released from prison and returned to his family. On zoom he showed is the card that he was sent by Alex's mother, saying that he was a blessing from God.

So that is the first thing I want to say about this great prayer of Paul's in Ephesians 3, that his readers would know the breadth, and length and height and depth, of the love of God,
He knew the depths, and he knew that that love was still there.

For Paul, God's love was the reason undergirding everything. In chapter 2 of Ephesians he speaks of the way that his readers were lost in sin, they were caught up in a world without meaning and obsessed with the narrow appetites of the body. And God released them from this depth, and why does he do this, simply because of the great love with which he loved us.

Love ultimately is the reason undergirding everything, and to comprehend that love, Paul uses the metaphor, or the language of space, of breadth and length.

The next I would like to say relates to the breadth and length. There is nowhere where God's love is not, there is no place it does not reach, it is extensive, to contemplate the view from the top of a mountain and see the length of a valley, is to have an understanding of length, of length in space and length in time, to understand the size of God's love, I love these words from the Victorian Preacher, Charles Spurgeon:

He loved you before all worlds; long ere the day star flung his ray across the darkness, before the wing of angel had flapped the unnavigated ether, before aught of creation had struggled from the womb of nothingness, God, even our God, had set his heart upon all his children. Since that time, has he once swerved, has he once turned aside, once changed? No; ye who have tasted of his love and know his grace, will bear me witness, that he has been a certain friend in uncertain circumstances.

*"He, near your side hath always stood.
His loving-kindness, oh! how good!"...*

You have had many trials and troubles; has he ever deserted you? Has he ever turned away his heart, and shut up his bowels of compassion?

No, children of God, it is your solemn duty to say "No," and bear witness to his faithfulness.

Ephesians 3 speaks of Paul, quite unusually getting on his knees to pray for his Ephesian readers. Sometimes Paul will speak of the end of time as the place where we get on our knees to pray to God, but this is the only time he speaks of doing it now. I don't know if this is a sign of the life to come, or of the physical effort that Paul engages in prayer. I think I believe the effort, I believe the effort here is to be part of reaching through to a moment of height, where the readers truly comprehend the love of God.

There is a lovely moment in a book by Gerard Hughes - the wonderful Jesuit priest who lead and spoke to so many students at Glasgow in the 1960s. After his momentous time as chaplain, Huges decided he needed to take time before going on to his next ministry, so he decided he went on pilgrimage, to walk from Weybridge in Surrey to Rome. For this he had trained by spending two weeks on a deserted Scottish island, and by practising walking and trying to harden his feet. Even with this training, he had many arduous moments camping, and at the mercy of who he met, at times he was like a broken man, but in Grenoble, as he caught sight of the Alps for the first time, that was a moment of elation, or arrival, something broke through, and he quoted this verse from Ephesians, that it was here in the arduous, demanding journey, that he sensed the love of God.

And so may it be for us,
In the depths, may we know it
In the sight of the size of the universe may we know it
In the journey may you ascend to the heights to know it
The wonderful, remarkable,
Breadth and length and height depth of the love of Christ
And when you know this
You are filled with the fullness of God.

AMEN

Prayer for Others

We pray for those Oh God
Who have given up on love
Who believe only now in harshness and disappointment
Lord have mercy
Christ have mercy

We pray for those Oh God
Whose definition of love
Has become too tough
Or too rigid
Whose judgement needs softening
Whose hearts have been too long clenched

Lord have mercy
Christ have mercy

We pray for our world
Overheated, we pray for climate justice and climate care

We pray for our world
In love with violence, we pray for peace, and peacebuilders, and peace
keepers

We pray for our world
Impotent to share its resources, we pray for fair trade, and land justice, and
the poorest to have their voice heard.

In the silence now,
We make our own prayers,
For those we love
For those who need you

Silence

And now hear us, we pray, in the words of Jesus.

*Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come, your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven,
Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as forgive our debtors
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil
For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever
AMEN*

CLOSING HYMN Hymn 553 In Heavenly Love Abiding

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that your blood was shed for me,
and that you call us, 'Come to me',
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am you will receive,
will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because your promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am – your love unknown
has broken every barrier down -
now to be yours, and yours alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, of that free love
the breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,
here for a season, then above -
O Lamb of God, I come.

BLESSING

May love be wide around you – in the name of Jesus Christ
May love be long before you – in the name of Jesus Christ
May love be deep beneath you – in the name of Jesus Christ
May love be high above you,
In the name of Jesus Christ
And of the Father
And of the Spirit
Now and forever

AMEN