

15 July 2018

Ephesians 1.3-14

The best composers know how to grab the attention. Some of the greatest orchestral compositions have stunning introductions.

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The beginning sets the tone for what is to come. Themes are introduced that are then played with throughout the piece of music.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians begins with a magnificent overture, expressed as a prayer of praise to God.

None of the other letters begins in quite such a way. It's as if this whole document has been penned with the intention that it will be read in the context of worship, and so begins with an enthusiastic offering of praise to God.

And there is something extravagant and breathless about these verses.

Extravagant – because the language is punchy and expressive – it adds theme upon theme, hyperbole upon hyperbole to convey the wonders of God's grace

...

- God has blessed us
- with every spiritual blessing
- he chose us
- he predestined us
- he adopted us
- we have redemption
- forgiveness of sins
- we have received wisdom and understanding
- God has made known to us the mystery of his will
- we have been sealed with the Spirit
- and all for the praise of his glory

... and those are just the highlights!

Breathless – because these twelve verses are written as one long sentence – these are the words of a preacher getting carried away with his theme, such

that there is no space even to put in a full stop ... It's as if when you have said all there is to say about the greatness of God, you haven't said enough and you need to say more ... and so the sentence just grows... and you don't want to start a new sentence because everything is tied to everything else ... There is so much to say, but ultimately there is just one thing to say! 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!'

Extolling God's praise will either leave us in silent, awed wonder ... or it will overflow with extravagance and breathlessness. And when you're writing, silence is not an option! So Paul opts for the other end of the spectrum.

This opening prayer, however, is not simply addressed to God. It is the beginning of a letter addressed to a Christian congregation. This prayer is intended to say something to them as well.

Now as an aside, I should just point out the footnote that you will see in our church bibles in verse 2. "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."

The footnote points out that some of the early manuscripts that we have of this letter do not contain the words 'in Ephesus'. In other words, these early manuscripts don't give us any indication of who this letter was written to. It could have been sent to any church ... or indeed it could have been penned with the idea that it would be circulated to a whole number of churches.

The fact that at the end of the letter Paul does not offer any personal greetings to the leaders and members of the church at Ephesus, only adds to this sense of mystery about the intended recipients of this letter. Paul spent three years with this church. He knew them well. In all of his other letters he always has things to say to some of the individuals in the church. Why not in this letter?

Well, perhaps this wasn't just intended for one church, but was a kind of 'round robin' to a whole number of churches – perhaps all of the churches around Asia Minor, and not just Ephesus.

Anyway, back to the point that I was making!

I think Paul uses the device of opening the letter with a prayer, not just because he has got something to say to God, but also because he has something important to say to his readers about their relationship with God.

And above all, through this prayer, Paul wants these Christians to feel part of something that is big and truly significant.

Let's put ourselves back into the situation of the members of the early Christian community.

- They were not part of something big, they were part of something that was small ... and that at times could feel somewhat insignificant. A church in a city like Ephesus might only have been 40 to 100 people in a significant centre of population. They were very much a minority group.
- They also followed a new teaching in a world that celebrated what was ancient. Today's Western world celebrates the new and the innovative and rather shuns the old and the traditional. In the first century world shaped by the culture of the Greek and Roman empires, to be credible you had to show that your roots were ancient.
- The experience of most Christians in joining the Christian community was that they were cut adrift from many of their previous communities where they had a sense of belonging. For those who had grown up in the Jewish community, to follow Jesus felt like the fulfilment of all that they had lived for ... and yet they now became part of a new community that welcomed both Jews and Gentiles ... and many of their fellow Jews just did not understand this ... and many found themselves cut adrift from the community of their birth.

And it was a similar experience for the Gentiles, the non-Jews. Religion was part and parcel of life in the Roman empire ... it infiltrated everything. But not just one religion. There were a whole plethora of religions, offering worship to a multitude of gods. And nobody particularly bothered which religion you belonged to, as long as you didn't challenge or upset the social order, and as long as you still offered your sacrifices when required to Caesar as Lord.

But when people became followers of Jesus, they became part of a group that wasn't religious in the conventional sense. They no longer offered

sacrifices. They had no formal places of worship or sacred sites. They refused to offer sacrifices to other gods, including Caesar. They often ended up being misunderstood and excluded. They also quite often were cut adrift from their communities of birth and belonging.

- And they ended up forming themselves into these extraordinary communities that were unlike any other communities in the society around them – bringing together Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free, the educated and the uneducated, the privileged and the bottom of the pile – trying to work out what the ‘rule of love’ meant for communities of this sort. They knew themselves to be acutely different from everyone else. The sense of ‘being different’ can be liberating, but it can also be disturbing ... because again, you can feel cut off from everything that is going on around you.

So here is this group of people who, as a result of following Jesus, could easily be feeling

- insignificant
- cut off and adrift in the world
- uncertain about where or whether they ‘belong’
- unsure about where they ‘fit’ in the world
- insecure about their ‘roots’
- isolated and irrelevant

And it is with all of this in mind that Paul begins his letter with this expansive prayer of praise, because he wants this fledgling Christian community to understand deep within their spirits

- that they are part of something truly big
 - the God and Father of Jesus Christ has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ
- that this the new community has deep, deep roots
 - the life of the community may focus on Jesus of Nazareth but actually our roots are much deeper. All that Jesus brought into effect began

‘before the creation of the world’ – your roots can’t get much deeper than that!

- and indeed in our modern world where it can seem that only what is new and innovative is valued, perhaps this sense of being deeply rooted in the purposes of God from before the foundation of the world, might just have some new resonance.
- that they ‘belong’ in this world in a way that is beyond their imagining
 - ‘in love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters in Jesus Christ’
our sense of belonging in this world does not begin with our ties to parents, family, community, like-minded friends, or nation, but is about our belonging to God in the most personal of terms.
 - When we ask the question, ‘Who am I?’ – the next question is often ‘Where do I find that I belong?’ And here is the most profound answer for followers of Jesus ...
- that they are caught up in something that is rich in purpose and meaning
 - notice how much of this language is about God’s intention and purposes
 - chosen
 - predestined
 - God working out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will
 - and if this is about the question of ‘What are we here for?’ then the answer is striking and visionary
 - chosen to be holy and blameless
 - adopted to be sons and daughters
 - we are here ‘for the praise of his glory’
 - and all of this takes account of the broken reality of our lives
 - redemption
 - forgiveness
 - God knows that our lives are broken and a mess ... and he is involved in the heart of things in Jesus to bring healing and hope.

- this is something far more than platitudes and idealistic wishful thinking.
- far from being 'cut adrift', they are participating in a movement that would bring 'all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.'
 - Something all-inclusive about the purposes of God.