

Scripture Reading for July 18 2021

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (NRSV)

23 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

⁵The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Ephesians 3:4-19 (The New Testament for Everyone - *adapted*)

When you read this, you'll be able to understand the special insight I have into the mystery of Christ. ⁵This wasn't made known to human beings in previous generations, but now it's been revealed by the spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶The secret is this: that, through the gospel, the Gentiles are to share Israel's inheritance. They are to become fellow members of the body, along with them, and fellow-sharers of the promise in Messiah Jesus. ⁷This is the gospel that I was appointed to serve, in line with the free gift of God's grace that was given to me. It was backed up with the power through which God accomplishes his work. ⁸I am the very least of all God's people. However, he gave me this task as a gift: that I should be the one to tell the Gentiles the good news of Christ's wealth - riches no one could begin to count. ⁹My job is to make clear to everyone just what the secret plan is, the purpose that's been hidden from the very beginning of the world in God who created all things. ¹⁰This is it: that God's wisdom, in all its rich variety, was to be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places – *through the church!* ¹¹This was God's eternal purpose, and he's accomplished it in Jesus Christ our Lord. ¹²We have confidence, and access to God, in him, in full assurance, through his faithfulness. ¹³So, I beg you: don't lose heart because of my sufferings on your behalf! That's your glory!

¹⁴Because of this, I am kneeling down before the father, ¹⁵the one who gives the name of 'family' to every family that there is, in heaven and on earth. ¹⁶My prayer is this: that he will lay out all the riches of his glory to give you strength and power, through his spirit, in your inner being; ¹⁷that the Messiah may make his home in your hearts, through faith; that love may be your root, your firm foundation; ¹⁸and that you may be strong enough (with all God's holy ones) to grasp the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know Christ's love – though actually it's so deep that nobody can really know it! So may God fill you with all his fullness.

Sermon: In Christ and Through the Church

Letters from jailed leaders to their followers are held in special reverence, because their imprisonment is down to the cause they passionately believe in. This has been true for Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, as well as for the apostle Paul. Whoever wrote Ephesians, and it could well have been Paul,¹ makes reference that Paul was himself a *prisoner* “for Jesus Christ” because his preaching to non-Jews had upset the civic status quo.² That fact added weight to his perceived authority, and the author is relying on that clout so that his message will be taken seriously.³ And what was the gist of that message? I spoke about that last week.⁴ It was about divine grace.⁵ And the outcome of God’s merciful initiative is that we are *all* being built into *one* family, based on the teachings of the apostles and with Jesus Christ himself as the cornerstone.⁶ Moreover, for that new community to authentically occur requires *unity*, recognizing that whatever our differences, we *all* now have “access in *one* Spirit to God the Father.”⁷ Recall too from a few weeks ago how controversial it was for non-Jews to be part of the Christian community without the need for adherence to those Jewish requirements of circumcision and keeping their strict dietary rules.⁸ The ethical principles for what it means to live as “members of the household of God”⁹ was still being worked out in practice. That continues to be the ongoing story of Christ’s Church!

The writer, with his mind focused on that majestic vision of God’s “new temple”¹⁰ being built amongst a united community of faith, turns to pray for his readers, since they are a beloved part of God’s extended family. But before doing so, he gets distracted for 12 verses (!) – and he reminds his audience of Paul’s commission to non-Jews.¹¹ And that mission itself began with God’s grace, since Paul was a persecutor of the church before his “road to Damascus” experience.”¹² As the earlier song made clear, Paul understood those words: “My sins, they are many, but Christ’s mercy is more!”

¹ Authorship of Ephesians was discussed in the previous sermon (see [4]). Authorship questions does not belittle this letter’s status or contents!

² Eph 3:1, 13; 4:1; 6:20. (Note: “This is the reason . . .” in 3:1 is repeated in 3:14; the writer goes on a tangent in-between! Also note that he saw his prisoner status as being to “Jesus Christ,” *not* down to the civic/Roman authorities . . .)

³ Eph 1:1 begins “Paul, an *apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God . . .*” which is a claim to (divine) authority.

⁴ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Gods-Rescue-Plan-and-Purpose.pdf> .

⁵ Eph 2:4, 8-9.

⁶ See Eph 2:19-20; 1 Pet 2:4-5, 9-10.

⁷ Eph 2:18. (a trinitarian precursor?)

⁸ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/A-Gift-of-Grace.pdf> .

⁹ Eph 2:19b.

¹⁰ Eph 2:21-22.

¹¹ See Eph 3:2-13, esp. v2, 6-7! (v13 suggests this diversion is pastoral reassurance to his audience over his present plight.) This is paralleled in Col 1:24 - 2:5.

¹² See Acts 9; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/An-Unlikely-Witness-to-the-Resurrection.pdf> .

It is worth pausing and reminding ourselves of the context in which the letter of the Ephesians was written. Many devout Jews *despised* the non-Jews as worthless in the eyes of God.¹³ Greeks and Romans *despised* Barbarians—those who lived outside of the Empire. An awareness of one’s status and contempt for others perceived to be beneath you was a way of life in the first century. In today’s world too, racism is still very much evident and there is nervousness over new waves of nationalism, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy throughout the Western world. The writer stresses unity at a time when some Jewish Christians might have thought themselves superior to those of other ethnicities. The author is emphatic that non-Jews, like you and me, are *not* second-class citizens; we are just as much a part of God’s family as Jewish Christians are. We have an *equal* share in God’s promises and grace; *God despises no one!* And that is the great “mystery of Christ” of which the writer speaks.¹⁴ The writer of Ephesians was passionately excited about this good news! If *we* ourselves are not excited about this then why on earth should we expect our family, friends, and neighbors to be interested in this transformative message of the mystery of Christ?

The writer then says the revelation of God’s open secret for inclusion is to happen *through the Church!*¹⁵ Not through what the Church *says*, although that’s vital, but through what the Church *is*, namely, a community in which men, women and children of every race, color, social, and cultural background come together to worship God authentically and live out Christ’s message. In contrast, governments tend to create societies and social structures in their own boring, uniform image—monochrome and one-dimensional. Or even worse: they tend to marginalize or kill people or groups who don’t fit into their narrow band of acceptability. The Church is to be different. It is to be diverse body that *demonstrates* God’s love, forgiveness, unity, and hope; a beacon of light into the darkness of a suffering world. Our churches are, then, to make a real and noticeable difference in society. Realizing *God’s* vision is something that Paul’s followers can *only do together*.¹⁶ Without *unity in love*, the church is unlikely to be effective. Without the Spirit’s enabling then like other movements, it will simply fizzle out. A minister’s task is therefore to keep before the congregation this vision of God’s new society as God’s *family* and instrument of grace and compassion in the world.

¹³ Isa 60:12; 45:14.

¹⁴ See Eph 3:4-5, 9. I would suggest this “mystery” is strangely expressed; is it hyperbole, is it persuasive or inspirational rhetoric? Paul, a Pharisee, would know the Jewish Scriptures. (This is evident in the undisputed letters.) The writer of Ephesians suggests God’s plan for history was *not* revealed to the Old Testament prophets. Yet God’s covenant with Abraham was to be a blessing for the *whole* world (Gen 12:2-3). And messianic expectations *were* evident in the exilic prophets (e.g., the OT reading of Jer 23:1-6), so the extent of the ignorance of this “mystery” to the author is baffling. (Moreover, according to Luke, the risen Jesus explained his mission to his followers by making connections with the Old Testament Scriptures, e.g., Luke 24:25-27, 44-46; Acts 2:14-36.) What are we to make of the suggestion that the *Holy Spirit* revealed this “mystery” in the life of the church to the apostles and Christian prophets? Regardless of how we respond to that epiphany, it reveals a theology of the Holy Spirit that is consistent with John 14:26; 15:26.

¹⁵ Eph 3:10.

¹⁶ This bold message delivers us from reducing the gospel to only being a one-on-one, *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ, important though that undoubtedly is.

After that detour, the writer prays a profound, passionate, and positive prayer of encouragement for the church.¹⁷ Although it's a short prayer, it's dense and complex; let's listen to it again:

For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on the earth is named. I pray that according to the wealth of his glory he may grant you *all* to be strengthened with power *through his Spirit* in the inner person, that *Christ* may dwell in *all your hearts* through *faith* . . .¹⁸

Let's pause and process that for a moment. The author's prayer is according to the riches of God's "glory," which is a flamboyant way of saying that he is *totally confident* that God will answer this particular request! Yet the writer is *not* proclaiming a victorious Christianity that has conquered the world, as some people imagine when they read this prayer. Paul's restrictions as a prisoner are not to be forgotten.¹⁹ Consequently, he is praying for an effective witness in what seems to be a powerless situation in relation to their cultural context, not unlike the church today. It is in this oppressive context that he prays that they will be "strengthened in their *inner being* with power through God's own *Spirit*."²⁰ And this phrase is poetically reiterated as "*Christ* residing in our *hearts*," our hearts being, in Jewish thinking, our wills—the place of rational thought and the source of all action.²¹ With those important background ideas in mind, the writer goes on:

“. . . that *Christ* may dwell in *all your hearts through faith*, so that, because you *all* have been rooted and grounded *together* in *love*, you *all* may be able to *comprehend* with all Christians everywhere what is the *breadth and length and height and depth*, and thus to know the *love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*, so that you *all* may be filled up to all the fullness of God.²²

"Being rooted and grounded in love" mixes a biological metaphor of a tree with an architectural analogy of a foundation for a building.²³ But roots and foundations are there so that we can grow or construct *upwards* and *outwards*. This prayer then builds on those bonds of *love* that already exist within a diverse community—together other faithful believers everywhere—so that we *all* may have the power to comprehend the unsurpassable *wisdom* of God, in other words, of the *limitlessness of Jesus Christ*.²⁴

¹⁷ Note also that the person is *kneeling* to pray, whereas people normally stood in that culture. Consequently, there is deep emotion embodied in this prayer—a prayer that is really *one* long sentence. Second, the use of the word "father" indicates a profound intimacy with God and points to our common identity as children of God. We are familiar with this intimacy in John's gospel (in the relationship between Jesus and the Father), yet here it is again. Moreover, the author calls fellow believers in Jesus by the generic title, "saints." Third, Father, the Spirit, and the Messiah Jesus are all mentioned in this short prayer, so forming the seeds of what would later become the doctrine of the Trinity.

¹⁸ Eph 3:14-19 (NET, NRSV); be careful, the NIV mistranslates the end of v18!

¹⁹ See Eph 3:1. See also [2].

²⁰ Eph 3:16.

²¹ Note too that the phrase "*Christ* residing in our *hearts*" points to God who no longer dwells in the Temple, rather the risen Messiah takes up residence in the lives of his followers.

²² Eph 3:17-19 (NET, NRSV). Notice the (Greek) 'plural' use of "you" here.

²³ The building metaphor has been mentioned in Eph 2:20-22; the biological metaphor reminds us of Jesus as the vine in John 15.

²⁴ And here we left with a bit of a problem because the object of those four dimensions ("the breadth and length and height and depth") is not specified by the author! (The NIV is misleading in its translation by *interpreting* what they consider to be implied by the Greek.) They give us the impression of a great vastness of something that is unsurpassable or inexhaustible, but to what do they refer? Scholars have come up with a number of suggestions. From the context of the prayer, I suggest that the phrase points to the unsurpassable *wisdom* of God: Jesus the risen Christ.

That news is so good—it is so wide, long, high and deep—that it is literally impossible for us to “get our heads around it”! The author’s prayer is that as we all explore with our *minds* the mystery of Jesus through diligent study; we all will also *experience* the *love* of Jesus and realize that his love is beyond *all* reason. The shocking thing for the confused world today is that such love surpasses all *human* wisdom and knowledge—all philosophy and science. The writer proclaims that by knowing and experiencing Jesus, we will literally “be filled with the fullness of God.” And what is the fullness of God? It is *Christ himself* who lives within us *all* by his Spirit.

Recognizing this mystery revealed is quite an epiphany! This “*aha*” moment is *the* turning point that changes *our* view of reality. It’s a red-line that marks a new beginning. The writer of Ephesians reveals, then, an empowering and inspiring vision and invites *us all* to be part of this pilgrimage.²⁵ On this quest, the Spirit wants us to explore all that we can know of Christ and to experience his love in all its completeness.²⁶ The effectiveness of any church relies on it being united. Practical demonstrations of love, along with studying together, are two essential spiritual disciplines for the Church. Let’s add prayer to that, because prayer is a vital aspect of the kingdom of God work and—consequently—we shouldn’t belittle the practice of prayer or succumb to thinking that it’s ineffective or a waste of time. Prayer brings together God’s love and power, and is evidence of our living relationship with God. Think of this specific prayer from Ephesians, then, as both a *daily* challenge *and* an opportunity. Remember, the author of this passionate prayer was convinced it’s the kind of prayer God answers.

In conclusion, as we begin to move slowly out of COVID restrictions, none of us are not sure what the “new normal” will look like – both as a global society and as a church. Both will *not* be the same as it was before. We can’t simply go back to what was. As a society, that would be a moral insult to those who have died or suffered greatly in one way or another. As we move forward, we need to have a powerful and inspiring vision of what life together can and should look like. That vision reminds us, in the midst of pain and suffering, of what is truly important. This letter to the Ephesians was written by someone fully acquainted with suffering and he reminds his readers of God’s mysterious and timeless plan. This writer is inspirational; among other things, he doesn’t deny the reality of suffering but points to what grounds and redeems them for a community of faith. In times of hardship and change, we need to hear again his message of hope. And because God has not abandoned us, but works *with us* to bring good out tragedy and hardship, we have solid grounds for confidence. Hold on to that thought in these uncertain times. Going forward, we can’t look backwards to what was; we will need to be creative, agile, courageous, expecting things to be different and in a state of flux. The world has changed; culture has changes . . . the church has changed, but its message has not.

²⁵ Recall that the wise men’s pilgrimage took them first to King Herod in Jerusalem, as that was the obvious place for a future king to be born (Matt 2:1-3). But (divine) wisdom was to be found in an *unlikely* place, in a house in the small town of Bethlehem (Matt 2:11). That mystery revealed resulted in them worshiping the Christ-child and giving of their best to him.

²⁶ We are invited to join in this trek with all fellow believers throughout history on an expedition that is a part of God’s loving, reaching-out community. It’s a trip that we do with each other, not on our own; it’s a *team* endeavor. It’s also a journey that will not be completed until we meet our Maker face-to-face.

The writer's final word of blessing and encouragement is also worth hearing: "Now to him who by the power that is working within us is able to do far beyond all that we ask or think, to him be the glory *in the church* and in Christ Jesus *to all generations*, forever and ever. Amen.²⁷ Let us pray.

²⁷ Eph 3:20-21.