

peace to those who were far away, and those who were near.” Eph 2:17.

And into all this uncertainty, all through Ephesians, and in Jesus, God speaks a peace over our restless hearts. It’s a peace Paul wanted the Ephesians to hear long after the words were read out and the scroll was rolled up. It’s a peace Jesus wants you and me to keep hearing when we move on to a different part of the Scriptures and don’t read this again for a while. And it’s a peace he wants us to take with us: “with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” (last week’s reading). Wear the gospel like shoes, walk it around, take it to people and places: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7)

Beautiful on the mountains, in the shops, at your neighbours’, at the doctor’s, at school, at work: bring the good news of the gospel of peace.

Ephesians is full of love, and it is full of peace. A lot of peace, and a lot of love.

Love is an even bigger ingredient in Ephesians than peace. It appears so many times, and Paul makes God’s love so real. He changes something that can be a fuzzy feeling kind of thing into something with shape and dimensions and power.

The Ephesians need to know God’s love; they have known it as far back as Acts 19, the first time Paul turned up in town and prayed that some of John’s disciples would be filled with the Holy Spirit. They needed to be reminded of it in Revelation 3, where Jesus asks the other John to tell them that they have ‘forsaken their first love.’

Paul longs for them to get this, so he makes God’s love sound like something you can grab hold of – “grasp how wide and high and long and deep is the love of Christ”; something you can be “rooted and established in”; something that we can know; something that we can be built up in. Paul shows us how alive God’s love is, and that it is for us.

But not just for you. “Walk in the way of love.” Walk about with it. Take it with you. Carry it where you go. Sound familiar? Shoes fitted with the gospel, walk in the way of love.

And that love is what we call grace. This letter is a hymn to God’s wonderful grace. Paul tells us again and again that God’s grace is rich, 1v7, 2v7. It’s God’s grace that saves 2v5, 2v8. God’s grace is given 3v2, 3v7, 3v8, 4v7. God’s grace is for all of us who love Jesus 6v24. Paul was writing to a mixture of people. Some of them would have felt rich; others poor. Paul says it is *God’s grace* that is rich.

Some of them would have felt strong; others weak. Paul says it is God’s grace that saves. In a thriving commercial city, Paul confounds the cultural expectation that the gospel has a price, and could be earned: God’s grace is given.

To that same mixture of people Paul says that Jesus is not just for one kind of person: Grace to *all* who love our Lord Jesus Christ. And just like the peace isn’t just for us – we put it on; the love isn’t just for us – we walk it out; the grace isn’t just for us either.

Grace was given to me *for you*, Paul says in 3:2, grace makes us a servant of the gospel 3:7, grace was given to Paul to preach 3:8, grace was given to each of us to serve one another 4:7. Why was God’s grace given to you? Who was it given to you to serve? How are you going to serve them?

Where are you called to wear the gospel like shoes, and carry it with you? Where are you going to walk in the way of love? Where are you going to use God’s grace to serve?



1:1-14

STANDING ON WHAT JESUS HAS DONE

In 2017, the 500th anniversary of one of the key moments of the Reformation, *Playmobil* produced a model of Martin Luther. (This is one of the reasons I love Germany so much.) When we were in Germany in 2018 in Nuremberg, I found a stack of them in a shop and brought one home with me. And there he stands, on my desk.

If there is one passage in the Bible that supports Martin Luther’s idea that Christianity is all about God, and all about what Jesus has done, then it is this one. This has to be what we stand on. We stand on it as individuals, and as a church. If we are holy, it is because God has made us that way. If we are faithful, it is because Jesus is the faithful one, and we belong to him.

This must lead us, like Paul, into worship. Reading Ephesians 1 is like being stood—that word again—on top of a mountain. Just look at how we are described in the box on the right.

And written in the heavens, written over all of them, writ large, is this word, this name, which comes back again and again in this passage. This word which appears probably 50% more in Ephesians than in any of Paul’s letters of comparable size, this name... CHRIST. The amazing name of Christ.

As I look again at that extraordinary list of words, the one that strikes me most is *chosen*. Maybe it’s because all of us who are over a certain age know what it is like *not* to be chosen. I think back to the school playground, and the football teams, the teachers picking two captains and then the captains getting to pick their own teams. We’re not all the one who gets picked first. We don’t always feel chosen. But here, God shouts the opposite. He says that our being chosen is not an



We are chosen... blessed...
loved... predestined...
adopted... redeemed...
forgiven... we have received
grace.

accident, or a decision of the moment. Before even the creation of the world, long before 2 plates of the earth's surface bumped into each other and started to make any mountains at all, God had chosen *you*. He knew there was going to be you, and he had chosen you. He has chosen us, Paul says later on, we were *predestined*. He knew there was going to be us, and he had chosen us. So actually every experience of not being the 'chosen one' that has ever happened to us, long since then, is in the shadow of this pretty much eternal, and certainly utterly ancient truth, that God has chosen us.

I don't know why God has chosen me. But he has! He hasn't chosen me because of what I do when faced with a right or wrong decision, because I don't always choose the right one. He hasn't chosen me because I always remember to read my bible and pray, or I take every opportunity to talk to someone about Jesus, or I care faultlessly for other people, or never spend my money on silly things, or constantly remember the poor, because I don't.

But he chose us. And he chose us, Paul says, according to his plan. Choosing you was no accident. It was God's plan. He chose us in accordance with his pleasure and will. That means that God chose us because he wanted to – he wanted you – and it was his pleasure. He delighted in choosing you. It's as if to say that every time you sing or pray anything like "Thank you God for choosing, forgiving, saving, loving me etc" he looks at you and he is saying, "My pleasure." This bit is really important, and we can see that, because Paul comes back to it a second time. He is so glad that he has chosen *you*.

It is according to his grace. That's why it is never about what we have done, or who is first in the football team. And we need his grace. We need it so much, not just in us being forgiven and saved in the first place, but in living for Jesus every day. And if we have a concern for quantity – is it enough for me? – then just look at how God's grace is described. It is rich (end v7); it is lavish (beginning v8). He has forgiven us according to the lavish riches of his grace, and he has chosen us. If you remember one thing from Ephesians 1, let it be that God has chosen you. Forget what someone else might say about you, what you might think about yourself, what you might even believe God says about you. Don't stand for it. Don't stand on it. Stand on something else. Stand on this: that God has chosen you, that it was his plan, always, because he wanted to, and that it was... it is still... his pleasure.

*Do you believe that God has chosen you? How does it affect the way you think about yourself, and how you live life?
What comfort can you take from knowing that being chosen is not about anything that we have done, but how amazing God is?
Spend some time in worship 'looking at the view', and admiring what God has done.*



6:21-24 FAREWELL—GRACE AND PEACE AND LOVE

I bet like me you love lots of things. One thing I really love, and I have enjoyed a lot during the lockdown, is cake. I love fancy cake and cheap cake, I love homemade cake and shop cake, I love cake. I love it so much I even love the cake I make, which is not always good, compared with the cake Cathryn makes, which is very good. One of the things required of good cake, which I do not make, is that all the ingredients are evenly distributed. A bit of everything in every bite. Mine is not like that...

We have got to the end of Paul's amazing letter to the Ephesians now, and I want to imagine this bit as the last slice of a totally amazing cake. And like all the best cake, we are getting a big bite of all the wonderful things that have gone into making it so delicious. If you look back over the whole letter one of the big ingredients is grace – 11 of those in Ephesians. Another one is love – 17 of those. And then there's peace – 7 more. Wherever we bite into the Ephesians cake we find grace, and love and peace. And here they are in the last paragraph – Grace, and love, and peace. In the first bite - "grace and peace", 1v2; "in love" – 1v4; and in the last – 6v23-24 "Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love."

These are brilliant ingredients. These are no "this will do" ingredients, these are nothing that will go out of date. These are the living, breathing heart of the recipe, they are the heart of the book, they are the heart of the gospel, they are the heart of Jesus, yesterday, today, and forever. Peace and love and grace. In every mouthful of Ephesians a whole lot of peace, and love and grace.

The peace Paul talks about is the richest, deepest kind of peace that there is. It is like that because it is rooted in eternity. Paul knows that the answer to all of our restlessness and searching and anxiety and whatever it might be are ultimately only to be found in Jesus. Think about the Ephesian church. A mixture of people in a mixture of a place. What about the Gentiles, asking themselves if this was really for them – is the Jewish God not just on the side of the Jews? Are we really welcome? See how they might worry about whether they have peace with God. Think about the Jews – isn't this just for us really? Isn't this our God? Does he need to be for anyone else? See how Jews and Gentiles alike might wonder if they can really have peace with this other lot. Jesus is here making one out of two, Paul says twice in Chapter 2. "Keep the unity of Spirit through the bond of peace", he adds in 4:3. What about me? Would God accept me? Would his church accept me? Am I the right kind of person? Am I close enough to God? None of it matters to God: "He came to preach

to keep it stimulated. It is about a relationship with God, in the end, and we know that in our relationships with people we keep needing to do little things differently to keep them vibrant and alive. What might you need to do?

It doesn't mean *all* to me because I don't always keep on praying. I don't pray with *all* perseverance, as another translation of the bible says. I pray for something once or twice. I pray for something and things don't happen as I hope. So there are times I have given up praying for certain people who don't know Jesus, sometimes people really close to me, and I haven't started again for a while. I haven't really persevered.

And it doesn't mean *all* to me because it is hard to pray for all the Lord's people. It can be practically hard, but more than that it can be emotionally hard. There will be brothers and sisters in Christ all of us have prayed for for a long time, for the same circumstances – they are long-term sick or in pain; their family do not know Christ; their relationships are difficult; their financial or job situation is bad; they keep making the same mistakes – and things don't change. How do I keep praying for them? How do you keep praying for them? Actually, how do I keep doing any of them? How do I pray with all perseverance? How do I pray in all kinds of ways? How do I pray on all occasions?

Well the answer is there, right at the beginning, but I skipped that bit. Pray in the Spirit, Paul says. I skipped that bit because you know, it's a preacher's trick, but the truth is we can all skip that bit. And as we do, prayer becomes our own effort, and not God working in us. You can't pray on all occasions, in all kinds of ways, with all perseverance, for all the people, any more than I can, but the Spirit in you and in me can. If you are tuning in today because you have started to pray during the lockdown and you saw on Facebook how I offered you some tips to take it further,

and you have stuck with me this far even as I have told you you basically have to do everything, *well done!* Because the good news is you don't. You just need the Holy Spirit, who dwells in all God's people, wants to keep filling all God's people with the presence of Jesus, and he will do it – *for you!*

Listen to these amazing words in Romans 8: “²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

All of us – *all* – however long we have been praying for, do need to hear Paul's instructions to pray on all occasions, in all kinds of ways, with all perseverance, for all the people – but most of all we need to hear, *Pray in the Spirit*. If you say to Jesus for the *first time* today, “I need your Holy Spirit to help me pray”, the great news is that you get the same Holy Spirit as someone who has prayed that prayer every day for 50 years. And just as last week it was God's armour that we put on, not ours, so prayer is God's Spirit working in us. Because prayer is like a panorama – it does give us a better of way seeing clearly *all* that's going on around us.

It is a panacea – it is the best way to bring Jesus's healing into *all* life and *all* situations. And it is – well what about pandemic? Let's reclaim that word, shall we? Let's agree that it means something different. Let's agree that it means that prayer, not disease, is for *all the people*. Let's agree that it means that God's Spirit can enable *all the people* to pray.



1:15-23 GOD'S POWER AT WORK IN US

I think we are probably more aware now than we have ever been before about how much power we need. Think of all the things you use that need power. If you don't believe me, think how many of those multiple extension leads you have got in your house. Think of all the things you have that need charging.



You will know the frustration – even the despair – of one of them running out. But of course, even though we are convinced that they are, none of these things is essential. We have convinced ourselves that we really need them, but we don't.

There is power, though, which is the complete opposite. There is power which people throughout the ages have convinced themselves that they can do without. Power which could always be there, that we could always draw on but that we often ignore. Power that is written into this reading from Ephesians, written into this book, written into the fabric of time and space and the universe. It's the power of God.

You are probably aware that I know a lot of things that are completely useless. I know a lot of things about people and places that I have absolutely no experience of. And I long for my knowledge of the power of God not to be something that I remember in my head, but something that finds a home in my heart. Paul talks about the eyes of our hearts being enlightened, of Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith. I long for it not to be theory, but to be experience. Do you?

Perhaps we might be convinced if we realise that God's power is *incomparable*. Perhaps we might be convinced if we realise that it is *for us*. Just for those of us who are leaders? No. For us who are the special Christians? No. For us who haven't already really messed up today? No. For us who believe.

Paul is thankful for the power of God, and he prays for the power of God.

And what a thing to believe, that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is at work in us. Just this week, and since I originally gave this talk, I have listened to one of the country's most prominent Christian leaders talk about this verse. "Do you really believe you have the same power in you that raised Christ from the dead?" he felt God ask him. "Yes I do," he replied. "But do you really?" God asked again. "No I don't," he replied. At this point this lovely man turned to us and said, "Because we don't, do we? Really? Really? Reeeaaalllly?!"

What is working in us, or at least what Paul prays *would work in us*, is the resurrection power of God. Any takers? It's not an idle question. Because what sin lurks in us, what struggles do we face, what problems in our family, at our job, in our church, that cannot be overcome by the resurrection power of God? If God can raise Christ from the dead, from under the weight of all the judgment that he took in our place, why might he not overcome this problem or that one?

And staggeringly – *staggeringly* – it was for us. It was all for us. It was for the church. *God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything FOR THE CHURCH.*

Because we are his body. Yes, we thank God for his power, Yes, we pray for his power, but in the end, if anyone out there is going to see God's power at work it is going to be through us (v19), it is going to be within us (3:20). Astonishingly, we, the Church, are the fullness of Christ. We are the place people are supposed to look and say, "I see the Resurrection power of Christ." They can't see Jesus, but they can see his power at work in us. Yes, God fills everything in every way, but fundamentally they are to see Christ's power in us.

You may well be very conscious of the places, and the people, where you are called to take this amazing, incomparably great power of God. Because it is God's power – his incomparably great power – for us who believe. It is for all his church, for all of us who believe. So one of the other things this amazing passage does, is hold out an invitation to us. Because perhaps we are uncertain that we are the church because we have not believed in Jesus. Perhaps we are uncertain of why we might even do that.

If so, maybe the promise of this passage, that God is for us not against us, that God wants to give us all things, that God wants his power to work through us for the blessing of the whole world, perhaps that could almost be reason in itself. *Because it isn't power that we think we need, but we don't. It is the opposite. It is power which we can convince ourselves that we can do without. Power which is always there, that we could always draw on, but that we often ignore. It's the power of God.*

Where are you called to take the incomparably great power of Christ? Who are the people that you are to take it to?

Are you certain you believe in Jesus? Does the idea that God wants his power to work through you help encourage you to follow Jesus?

Do you believe that God's power can work through you?



6:18-20 GIVING PRAYER YOUR ALL



I wonder what the most important single instruction is that someone has ever given you. Maybe when you were younger a parent or another important adult told you something that has stuck with you for years. Maybe one single line someone spoke to you once has stuck in your mind.

There are so many single lines in the bible, so many even in the book of Ephesians, that we could remember like that. I really hope that over the course of this year, some of them

have stuck with you like that. But if nothing has yet, how about this one verse? "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

The most important word in this passage is one of the smallest: "All". It's there again and again – all times, all kinds, always, all the people. You might know the Greek word is *pan* – as in

panorama – a view of all that is around us

panacea – a cure for all ills

and of course *pandemic* – a disease that affects all people

So when we see *all* in this passage, we can be sure it means *all*.

I say that because it doesn't mean *all* to me. I know it doesn't mean *all* to me, because I don't pray on all occasions. I pray on a lot of occasions, but not all of them. Often I worry instead of praying – the opposite of Jesus's good advice, which Paul reminds us of a couple of times. Often I don't offer to pray for people because I worry what they will think. So there are a couple of ways I don't pray on all occasions. What about you?

It doesn't mean *all* to me because I expect I don't pray in all kinds of ways. I have been thinking for the last week or so that I haven't fasted and prayed, for example, for a long time. I have a plan about how I am going to do this, but I haven't put it into action yet, so do please come back to me and check whether I did anything about it. Don't let me get away with it. Prayer is a business where we can get in a rut, and often need to do something new

Well let's look at the second picture. The second one seemed more in line with what I had in mind. A tall, man, standing upright, fully kitted out with shield, sword, helmet, breastplate armour – yes that certainly seems to fit the bill and fits in with the pieces of armour we read about in this passage. And maybe we could for a moment re-enact this. We have spent a lot of time sitting down in our services and maybe you've been spending more time during lockdown sitting down. So now's your chance. Let's stand. Did you notice how many times we are told to stand in this passage? What's so special about standing? Chrysostom says: "The very first feature in tactics is, to know how to stand well, and many things will depend upon that." If you are a boxer/wrestler, your trainer recommends you learn how to stand, how to stand firm. It's drawing up a military formation. How do soldiers on parade stand? Stand their ground. So let's for a moment do that. Stand at ease; what are you wearing?

Have you got a belt on? A belt of truth. Have you got a breastplate on – of righteousness? What are on your feet? Have you taken up a shield? Take up the shield of faith. Have you taken a helmet? Take the helmet of salvation. And the sword of the Spirit – the word of God. Pick that up if you have one and hold it.

A Roman soldier has all these pieces of equipment. To put on the full armour of God so that we can take our stand against the devil's schemes, we have to put it on. What are the devil's schemes? Without wanting to give him too much prominence, we need to know what our enemy is like. The tempter. The liar. The murderer. The one who comes to destroy. The one who comes to divide. Devil means "accuser". Paul says he's an angel of light, a god of this age. He's compared to a lion and a serpent who seeks to oppose God and defeat his work – remember how Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan." So this picture of the soldier appealed to me...

But then my eye fell on the third image; a soldier kneeling. I'm not going to ask you to do that but you might like to sit down if you're not already! To me it was a sign of someone praying, someone bowing down to their God. Seeking help, guidance, strength for the battlefield, or weeping at the loss on the battlefield. It's all very well putting on this armour of God but this warfare is to be waged with an enormous amount of prayer (as we shall hear next week).

Then the final picture of soldiers, an army. This reminded me we are to join together. Shoulder to shoulder. Shields overlapping. Ephesians is a church, made up of individuals but together they are the people of God. There are times when solitary effort may be necessary but we are so much better when each, individually equipped, can join together and struggle. That's why Satan will try and stop us gathering together to pray. How many times has something happened/cropped up at the last moment that has stopped you from attending church, a prayer group, reading the bible, worshipping. I wonder as an angel of light whether he's also not been in our gatherings, our church, dividing, destroying, accusing. Do we respond by putting on the armour of God?

Let us stand and put on the full armour of God
With the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness in place,
our feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace
with the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation
and the sword of the Spirit, the bible, the word of God.



2:1-10 SAVED FROM DEATH BY GRACE



All of us love a rescue story, I think. When we looked at this story the other week we shared our own stories of rescuing and being rescued, from the person who had helped out at the scene of a car crash to the one who had got stuck in a hotel bed just a couple of nights before (!)

Perhaps the greatest modern rescue story, though, is when the 33 miners above were saved from death in a collapsing mine in Chile in 2010. They were lost. In some ways you might say they were as good as dead. Everyone knew that they were in desperate need of rescuing. When they eventually got a little narrow drill right down to them, this note came back – "the 33 of us are well in the refuge" – but that couldn't last. They couldn't be down there forever, and survive.

And Paul, writing to his friends in Ephesus, reminds them that that was where they once were. They were dead. In the way that they lived their lives without following God's way, without thinking about him, they were dead. It wasn't just the Ephesians, Paul says. It was all of us. All of us have done this, Paul says. All of us have done what our own human nature has convinced us is right. All of us have done what we want, even when we know it is not the right thing. Paul says that all of us are 'by nature deserving of wrath.'

Please do not worry if you have got to this point, and feel sombre. This is serious stuff. But there is good news.

God simply will not leave you and me alone in our mess. He will not leave us sitting

in the mine, wondering if help will come. He will not remain up there in heaven, watching at a distance, wondering if we will find our own way out. God loves you. He does not love you in spite of his better nature, wishing he could simply stand in judgment over you, like the religious leaders around Jesus. He loves you, he wants you, he will give you chance, after chance, after chance to turn back to him as he has turned himself towards you. His son Jesus has died and risen so you will not only die, but rise to be with him forever. Thank God that he does not have the little bit of love I so often have for other people, but *great* love. Thank God he does not have *just about enough* mercy, but is *rich* in mercy. It is truly something amazing to be loved without condition.

God made us alive in Christ when we were dead in our transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

There is nothing we can do for ourselves. We look at the story of the miners, and we recognise that about the *most* they could do was co-operate with the rescue effort. They just had to wait. It really wasn't about them. It was in the gift of all those many rescuers working and working to set them free. I mean, they couldn't just stay in the refuge. They did have to get in the capsule. But that was it. We know what happened to the miners. The rescuers went down to them, and they brought them up to the surface. God came down to us, and, Paul says, *he raises us up with Christ*. I meet so many people who are trying to pull themselves 2000 feet to the top, hand over hand over hand. Christ raises us up. He loves us.

And *because* God loves us, not *so that* he would love us, we do good. We are never supposed to save ourselves from sin and death. But we are always supposed to do the good which God has prepared for us. We are supposed to do good spurred on by the knowledge that God is great in love, and rich in mercy. We are supposed to show the same love and mercy God showed us in rescuing us. We don't do good on the basis that people have done good to us, or that they could do good back, but because we are being like God, who is rich in mercy and love. Paul writes that we should not tire of doing good, because in the end we will reap a harvest if we don't give up.

And we become part of God's rescue plan. He is calling us to share what we have seen and heard. What if the first miner had kept it to himself? We are called not to keep God's good news for ourselves, but share it in our own way. I meet a lot of people who say something like, "We are ok in the refuge." "We're fine." But that can only last so long, can't it? In the end people need bringing back to the surface. They couldn't have stayed down there forever. They need God, who is rich in mercy and great in love.

Do you know in your heart that God has rescued you, and brought you from death to life?

Where do you sense God calling you to do good, whether or not you ever see anything come of it?

Who might God ask you to share the good news of his rescue with, in your own way?

14



EPHESIANS

6:10-17 THE ARMOUR OF GOD (Father's Day)



Our Fathers might not be/have been in the military, but we as Christians are in a battle. A spiritual battle. And so we're nearing the end of our series on Ephesians and we have some verses many of you may have come across before. And although it may seem an unusual subject to have on Father's day, as we have seen in the bible, there have been some fathers who have fought in wars, for people, and Paul says so do Christians. We are in a spiritual battle. So bearing in mind Cornelius was a centurion, I thought I would remind myself of what Roman soldiers look like. And the four pictures above are what I found.

Four pictures: I'm not sure which one you would have thought matched your ideas. But the first one caught my eye: a small child, cartoon like character grinning from ear to ear – was definitely not what I thought of. It seemed completely incorrect. And we can sometimes get the wrong idea from what we read in the bible. Yes we are in a battle but it's not against people. Paul says our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm. Walter Wink in Naming the Powers says this: "It is the suprahuman dimension of power in institutions and the cosmos which must be fought, not the mere human agent."

Another aspect we can misread is that it is the armour *of* God. Paul repeats that it is 'the whole armour of God'. Only the armour of God will ever suffice us in this conflict in which we are engaged. There is nothing we can do that will protect us against this wily, subtle, powerful enemy but the armour of God Himself. It's not our armour, or someone else's, the armour is provided by God. Not our resources, but his resources. Not our ideas, but God's provisions.

A final thing we can lose sight of is that we are to put on the full armour. Has this cartoon character got the full armour of God on?

under Christ to the extent that those of every nation, tribe, people and language will stand before Jesus when he returns. That is the note of unity that Paul sounds in Ephesians 1, and which echoes through so much of the rest of the Scriptures.

It is about unity, not enmity, an idea that Paul develops in Ephesians 2. Paul looks at the Ephesian church, a wonderful mixture of Jew and Gentile in a real melting pot of a place, and he longs for them to remember they are not two people but one, they are not enemies but united as brothers and sisters in Christ.

If, Paul says, Jesus has reconciled us to one another through the cross, that is where we start. More than anything else about us, if we say we are followers of Jesus, that is what we have in common. If Jesus has died for us, has risen for us, if we have life in him, then nothing else need divide us from one another. This is what we have to offer the world. We have only Jesus, who died for all, and makes one new humanity where the old us will always seek to separate, and divide, and look with suspicion from a distance.

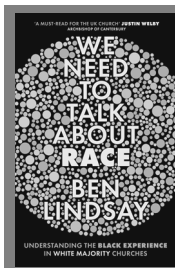
Because it is about unity – remember last week that Paul was looking at a church that was men and women, and parents and children, and slaves and masters, and he was trying to find ways to make them one. Christ is all and in all, all are one in Christ Jesus. But it raises a question. Does one make us all the same?

And for some people that fear is very real. Because even though we don't see all of it, there are a whole load of things about the way we do church that are just as much about our culture as they are about Jesus. Part of that is ok; Paul says he was all things to all people in the hope of reaching some of them. But we need to make sure that we are not using culture as a barrier to people hearing the gospel. We said at the beginning that South Norfolk is 98% white, so anyone coming into our churches who is not white is going to be very much in the minority. How do we not just welcome them, but include them, adapt so they can fit in? And would we do the same for other difference too? If we are mostly married, what about single people? If we are in the 2nd half of life, what about those in the first? If we are comparatively wealthy, or middle class, what about people who aren't? You can see how it goes.

The church is not called to uniformity; it is called to unity. One day God will gather us before his throne. There will be people of every kind there. Everything that we think makes people different, all those characteristics gathered before the throne.

One day God will gather us before the throne, but for today he gathers us around the cross. The cross is a place where we bring our sin. We recognise every time that we have failed in the way we have treated someone because they look different, we repent of it. We choose not to do it again. I gather at the cross with my failings in this area today. How about you?

We gather at the cross with our pain. We recognise that we are broken because of things people have said to us because of our ethnicity, or any other reason we are different from them. The cross is a place to forgive and let go. What do you have to bring today?



We recommend Ben Lindsay's excellent book *We need to talk about Race*, written specifically to address issues of race in the UK church. Ben will be speaking at New Wine: United Breaks Out on Friday evening and Saturday afternoon (as part of a series of seminars on race happening every afternoon). <https://www.new-wine.org/breaksout>



2:11-22

GOD TAKES DOWN WALLS AND BUILDS CHURCHES



The pictures above are of some walls. We all probably know the former Berlin wall, the planned wall between the US and Mexico, and the dividing wall between Israel and Palestine. But it isn't just other countries that build walls. The fourth picture is in Oxford, a wall built by a property developer to separate rich and poor residents, which stood for **24 years**. We know of neighbours arguing over fences, family members falling out about Brexit... we really do like putting up walls.

I put up walls in all sorts of ways too. I put up walls between me and people who think differently from me. But I catch myself putting up walls in other places, too. I put up walls between myself and people who look differently from me, for example. Where there is difference, there can be fear, and where there is fear, people put up walls. People build walls, but God takes them down.

In the bible text we see an old and bitter separation, going right back to the first time that God separated a people for himself. And in separating a people for himself, God separated a people from himself. There were two separate peoples. There were Jews and Gentiles, there were the circumcised and the uncircumcised, there was Israel and there were foreigners, there was an in crowd, and there was an out crowd.

And writing to the Ephesians, Paul says that as they were mostly foreigners, they were in the out crowd. They did not belong. He uses some really strong words in verses 12 and 13. Separate, excluded, foreigners, without hope, without God, far away. As with the image of death and life in the first part of the chapter, Paul is using strong word pictures to make us realise where we are without Jesus. We can all picture being separate, being excluded, being far away. None of us, I don't think, feels that those are good places to be. *I want to belong. People are made to belong.* Paul looks at the Ephesians, obviously mostly Gentiles rather than Jews, and he

reminds them where they have come from. But he has something more important to do than tell them where they have come from. He wants to tell them where they have got to. He holds out his hands to them, and he says, “You who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

God is breaking every wall down. He is breaking down everything that would separate you and me in our sin from the holiness of God in his people. We talk of coming to Christ, and rightly so, but here Paul emphasises the greater movement of God. Any movement of us towards God is always secondary to the extraordinary movement of God towards us. I love the fact that when I looked up the Berlin wall, it was really much harder for me to find a picture of it standing up than it would have been for me to find a picture of it being knocked down. That’s what God is doing in Christ. He is breaking barriers down.

We have been brought near by the blood of Christ (v13); we have been reconciled to God through the cross (v16); we have access to the Father by the Spirit (v18) Aren’t these so often our worries? Are they yours? “God is so distant from me.” You have been brought near by Jesus’s blood. “God holds things against me.” You have been reconciled to God through the cross. “God wouldn’t have me in his presence.” You have access to the Father by the Spirit.

Jesus has brought us near, he has given us peace, he is breaking walls and barriers down. Jesus is taking two groups of people who are totally opposed to one another, and he becomes the way they can be united. Jesus has reconciled Jew and Gentile to God through the cross.

Jesus is reinventing the way the world works, because God is building something. He is taking you, and me, and everyone in this community who believes in Jesus, and he is building a church. God doesn’t build walls, he builds the church.

He takes the strongest of foundations, which is Christ himself, and he builds it on everything the prophets foretold about who Jesus is, and what he would do; and everything the apostles said about who Jesus was, and what he had done, and he builds a church. Everywhere people agree to make Jesus the thing they build on, God is building his church. It is the holy temple of the Lord. And it is not only them, then. It really is us, now. You too, Paul writes to the Ephesians. You too, I want to say to you.

And he will do it. I love the fact that Paul does not talk here about people building a church. Do we know it is God who does the building? I am prepared to admit to trying in about a hundred different ways to build God’s church. But I am not sure how often I try just letting him. And I know that God wants to build his church, and he wants to build it using you and me, together, and he wants to dwell amongst us.

Think and pray about these amazing ideas: when we gather together to worship, we are being built into a place where God lives... when we decide to make Jesus the one person we build our life on, we are being built together into a place where God lives... when we pray and pray for difficult people, when we share Jesus in our own way, when we love and serve people not expecting anything in return, we are being built together, and God dwells amongst us.



THINKING ABOUT RACISM FROM THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS



There is a saying you might know about how we pray with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. It might not work these days with our bible on our phone and our news on our phone, but you get it don’t you? We are supposed to connect God and this world that we live in. And with everything that has been in the news in the last couple of weeks, I think that we need to talk about race.

We need to talk about it, even though South

Norfolk is 98% white, and so it doesn’t seem a problem here, perhaps. It’s other places in this country where people who aren’t white are 9 times more likely to be stopped by the police; 2.5 times more likely to be suspected of shoplifting; twice as likely to be abused or spoken to rudely by a stranger in the past week; twice as likely to be treated differently because of their hair, clothes or appearance.

Lots of passages from Ephesians remind us of our equality and unity in Christ. We’ll get to them in a moment. But even before that, in the beginning, God made humanity, in his image. And he told Adam and Eve to fill the earth, and as people of different ethnicities have populated the whole earth, we see that happening. That there would be people of different kinds filling the earth was what God intended.

We see in the ministry of Jesus that he engages with people from beyond his own nation.

We see in the death of Jesus that Christ died for all (2 Corinthians 5:15). So everyone, whatever their background, is equal, because all of them are included at least in the possibility of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul again, between Galatians 3 and Colossians 3: no male or female, no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. They are all one in Christ Jesus.

Paul’s emphasis through Ephesians is on another idea: unity. Paul has a massive and eternal vision of everything being brought together under Christ. It’s the vision that we see described another way in a famous passage from Revelation 7: “⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’

The gospel is for everyone, Christ died for everyone, and he is bringing everyone together

First Paul looks at marriage, at husband and wife. Having just said we are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, he reaffirms that instruction to the wives in Ephesus; “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” becomes “submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.”

This is the most amazing thing for Paul to say. Most of all because in reading it, it creates a lot of questions for me as a husband. A lot more questions than it might for a wife, in lots of ways. It sounds that Paul is saying that if the husband is the head of the wife, he is to be one in the same way as Christ is the head of the church. Most of the times I have heard anyone talk about these verses, it ends up sounding like a wife just has to do as she is told. But that can't be it. The relationship of Jesus to his church is not first of all expecting us to do as we are told; it is loving us completely whatever we do. So while Paul mentions wives first in his list, it seems to me that it is the husbands who are to sort themselves out first!

The way the passage goes on just confirms that. In Paul's culture, women were expected to submit to their husbands and to an extent he takes that as a given, and speaks into it. But remember he started not with one-way submission, but each of us submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ. So what does it look like in the other direction?

Well here is the first totally revolutionary statement Paul makes. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. What is it about the way that Jesus relates to the church that you love the most? The way he is faithful to it always? A husband wouldn't have had to treat his wife that way in that culture. Is it the way that he loves it so much he would die for it? A husband wouldn't have had to make a sacrifice like that. All the ethical demands Paul makes of husbands are radical and new.

But there is more to the family than that. Paul is concerned for the relationship of parents and children as well. Again, Paul starts with the thing that in those communities was a given: like “wives, submit to your husbands”, now “Children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” There was an absolute expectation in 1st century cultures in different ways that children would obey their parents. We still know this is important in some ways, and Paul says, “this is right.” But again it isn't just about blind obedience. Paul insists that children have a right not to be frustrated, or worse, by their parents; instead they are to train them up to know the Lord.

If we are in one of those relationships at the moment – if we are married, if we have children in the house – in a way we can apply this passage more easily. But what of the rest of us? If we are on our own in the house today, what do we do with these household instructions? We can pray for couples, and parents, and children, but what do we do? Well we start at the beginning. We submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In God we see relationship at work, and understand how in God Father, Son and Holy Spirit give of themselves to each other. And in submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ that is what we are called to do. It humbles me to think how often putting someone else first like Jesus did is an idea in my head, or words on my tongue, like now, and how rarely it is something I do. I *will* do something, but in the end will I get something back? Is it ok if someone has more than me? Looks better than me? Is ahead of me in the queue? But Jesus calls me as one of his people, to submit to others out of reverence for him.



3:1-13 THE MYSTERY OF FAITH



It's official! Ephesians is the most mysterious book in the bible! In the translation of the Bible that we normally use, the word *mystery* appears 26 times in total, and 7 times in this book of Ephesians, making Ephesians *the most mysterious book in the Bible!* And the word *mystery* appears loads of times in this reading, making this passage *the most mysterious in the Bible!*

When I visited my grandparents as a child, I worked my way through a whole shelf of Agatha Christie mysteries. Masses of them. The crime happens, and then at the end the detective gathers all the suspects around and reveals what has happened. That is what Paul is doing in this passage. Something not terrible but wonderful has happened, and he wants to draw us all in and explain to us exactly what has gone on. And just like the roomful of people in the Agatha Christie stories, we are all to be involved in what has been going on.

In a way the mystery is what Paul has already explained in Chapter 2, but he is so amazed by it himself, and convinced that other people might not 'get it', that he decides to explain again. The mystery is that through Jesus, Gentile and Jewish believers alike are heirs together, members together, sharers together.

It is this word *together* that gets Paul, isn't it? Heirs together. Being the eldest, I have been known to complain jokingly to my dad that I should get the biggest share of the family estate, when I know they have shared it equally between the three of us. The younger brother, the Gentiles, you and me, we will inherit equally with Jewish believers because we are heirs through Jesus, the true son, the true heir. We were apart from God, but now we belong together to the body through Jesus, our head. We had no seat at the table, but now we share together in everything which Jesus

promised.

I want us never to be dulled to the gospel by many centuries of Christian tradition in this country, or many decades of our own discipleship. I want us to embrace again this amazing mystery. I want us to consider where we were without Christ. We have spoken in recent weeks of how he moves us from death to life, from far to near. We were dead, we were far away. We are alive, we are near. I want it to quicken your heart to think that Jesus is for all of us, for you and for me, and he stands in amongst us.

Imagine being one of these first Ephesian Christians hearing this. Imagine having felt there was a wall built up around the Jewish people and their God, the only true god, and now it had all come tumbling down. Imagine being in a part of the world where all of this is new. They are discovering something wonderful, and mysterious, and new. I long that the gospel would always be new for us.

It is new for Paul, isn't it? It has made him look at Jesus in a new way, it has made him look at the world in a new way, it has made him look at himself in a new way. It is not about us any more than it was about Paul. It is God's gospel, God's grace, God's power, and we are God's servants. Paul has learnt this thing which needs to be new to all of us, constantly new. You are where you are because of God; you do what you do in his kingdom because of God.

But although it isn't about us, it does involve us. It is all to be revealed through the church. *Look at us*, we're to say to the angels. *We're going to show you the wisdom of God.* And it's not some crazy one-off idea of God's. It is his eternal purpose. Through Jesus, he always intended it to be this way.

And what does someone do, when they grasp the amazing dignity and purpose which the gospel gives them? They don't look at God in fear, from far away. Remember 2:13? "We have been brought near by the blood of Christ." No, they approach God with freedom and confidence.

And what do you do, when you know you can approach God with freedom and confidence? Well you pray, don't you? Paul is a man who knows that he can pray. Next week we will focus in on his prayer for the Ephesians and the amazing thing that it is.

But what about today? Well we know now, don't we? We have a mystery revealed. A mystery that is revealed by God's Spirit, revealed through the church, and rooted in prayer.

Does the good news of Jesus feel dull and familiar to you, or is it something that is always new and amazing?

Do you feel that through Jesus, you belong to God's people now? Do you have the sense that you have been brought close, made alive in Christ, and that he stands with us?

What more could the church do to show this amazing new reality to the world?



5:21-6:9 HOUSEHOLD RELATIONSHIPS



I wonder what family means to you? I wonder if it means the same thing to you now, during COVID-19, as it did before? Does what you think about family look the same? Does the fact that you might have been either living in someone else's pocket, or not seeing people and really missing them, make you think differently? Is family a more or less positive picture than it was before?

We all have very different experience of family. Some of us grow up in families that are great, and others are difficult. Some of us are in lovely family situations at the moment, and some of us not. Some of us really miss people who are not here any more. Some of us have been through marriage break-up, or had it happen in our families. Lots of different experience.

When we listen to the words "submit to one another", I think some of it feels natural to us today. We live in a culture where we understand that there should be equality. We understand that in a relationship we need to balance our desires and needs with those of others.

Paul writes to the church in Ephesus that he wants them to do this, because of Jesus. He looks at Jesus who by his life, death, and resurrection has changed everything, has transformed the world, and he says, I want you to live this transformed life now. I want your relationships to be transformed.

Everything that follows on the next page sits inside this bigger principle that everyone who follows Jesus is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and everyone who is filled with the Holy Spirit is to demonstrate that, in submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ.

On the day of Pentecost. God is doing such a new and strange thing that people are convinced that the disciples are *drunk*. And I don't think that criticism can have ended, even with everything that Peter and Paul and all the others had taught the church about how this is what God was doing, it was the gift that Jesus promised, it was for everyone who believed in Jesus. I think this drunkenness accusation must have continued, and that's part of why Paul says to them "Don't get drunk on wine, be filled with the Spirit."

It is a strange thing, and it is something that Paul tells the Ephesians to keep coming back to. When he says to them, "Be filled", he is using a continuous kind of word. Keep being filled. Keep on being filled. Whatever anyone else says, however much it may look strange, even to you, this is the fulfilment of God's promise. Don't settle for second best, whether it's wine or anything else. Go on being filled with the Holy Spirit.

And we aren't even talking about biblical times. A friend of mine from theological college told me about a time when the Holy Spirit was moving amongst their congregation and there were frankly some weird and wonderful things happening. So weird, in fact, that a member of the public who walked in at the back and had never seen anything like it, concluded that it was necessary to *call an ambulance*. Can you imagine?

But we don't just have to imagine. We can experience it ourselves. I had been a Christian quite a few years before I first knew what this really felt like, I think. *Being filled with the Holy Spirit*. Please don't mistake me. I believed in Jesus and in the gospel, I knew that I was saved and forgiven and that God loved me, I knew that the Holy Spirit was in me, but I don't know that I felt full. But God was working in me because he is kinder than I deserve, and I remember being at a conference the first time that in my case I felt the gift of tongues bubbling up in me. But because I have always worried about what people think, and because part of me wants to be in control, I suppressed it. But God is gracious and kind, and a few months later, when it bubbled up again, I didn't, and as I worshipped God it flowed out of me.

I don't want to get caught up too much with one person's experience because we are all different, but I am going to stop a moment and notice a couple of principles which I do think are important. First, if we are going to be filled with the Holy Spirit, how much room is there in there? It is easy for me to ask for more of God, but can I do that if I am not prepared for there to be a bit less of me? Less room for God, perhaps, if I am just full of me. The reason that I didn't suppress what God was doing the second time around was because I had had, in my early 20s, probably my worst week ever, and all the "what will people think about me" stuff didn't matter any more. I was brought down low, I felt empty, God filled me. There was less of me, and more room for God.

Utterly wonderful. People who are locked down and fearful became liberated and full of the power of God. People who believe in Jesus, and who have God's Holy Spirit, nonetheless need to be filled. Weird but wonderful.

Spend some time reading and praying over this brilliant quote:

Do you know anything of this fire? If you do not, confess it to God and acknowledge it. Repent, and ask Him to send the Spirit and His love into you until you are melted and moved, until you are filled with his love divine, and know His love to you, and rejoice in it as his child, and look forward to the hope of the coming glory. 'Quench not the Spirit', but rather 'be filled with the Spirit' and 'rejoice in Christ Jesus'.



3:14-21

Named, Rooted, an Immeasurable God



It was wonderful to gather together as church on 22nd March, even though we had to meet online rather than in our buildings. About 45 of us appeared on screen to celebrate Mothering Sunday, and to think together about some things that Paul says to us about God in the bible which can really help us at this difficult time. If you have access to the internet, I have put a video of this on Facebook and Youtube, which you can find by searching for "Venta group of churches." It was filmed in Stoke church shortly before we were asked to lock the building.

I sent people looking for things in their houses, starting with something with their name on it. For most of us our name says something about the family we belong to. Mothering Sunday is a day to celebrate the human family big or small, but we also thought about what it means to be part of God's big family, who all have the name of Jesus in common. We are adopted into it, born again into it, through faith in Jesus, and it is bigger than any place or event: it is about what the Holy Spirit has done in our hearts.

In terms of God's family, we belong together because we share the same Father. In Ephesians 3 Paul connects the idea of having God as our Father with prayer. At this time we have to pray, and we *can* pray. God is an amazing Father who loves to hear us pray about anything – and he really does hear.

Then we went looking for plants in our house. Most of us could find one of these. Paul talks about us being rooted and established in love. Lots of you know from your own experience, or have seen elsewhere, what it is like when a family root each other in love. It is a place where we thrive. A plant needs roots that go down deep to draw in all the good stuff that it needs, and keep it firm and secure. That's what we can do with God. We can put our roots deep down in him, we can draw on all the goodness he has to offer us, we can trust that he will hold us firm in the storm we find ourselves in. Or for a very different image, picture the cross, firm in the ground, holding Jesus there, its four beams up and down and left and right showing us a love that is wide and long and high and deep. Colossians, which is a kind of parallel to Ephesians in some places, talks about us being rooted *in Christ*. It is something very real and concrete and firm.

Last, we found a measuring device of some kind – a ruler, a tape, a jug, and so on. We remembered Paul's encouragement to us that God can do *immeasurably more* than all we ask or imagine. We measure and count so many things all the time. You will have heard lots of numbers about coronavirus. Some of them are helpful to us. Others could make us a bit scared. Paul says that there is something we cannot measure – and that is what God can do. No person, however much they might like to, can do the immeasurable amount that God can. I can understand if, at the moment, you feel like God can only do a very little, if anything. Maybe that's partly because you have prayed for things in the past, really prayed, prayed more for things that didn't seem possible, and you have been disappointed, and it hurt. The good news for you is that he can do immeasurably more.

Some of you, on the other hand, will be thinking, God can do the most amazing things! The good news for you, is he can do even more. He can do more than any of us can imagine!

And with this in mind, we keep on praying. Keep praying with us through this coronavirus crisis. Join us online. Print out prayer materials from our website. Print out another copy and drop it into someone with no internet. Let's not stop praying.

Why not do what some people in our churches do, and pray the words of Ephesians 3:14-21 for yourself or someone you know? I could pray for Cathryn, my wife, for example:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen Cathryn with power through his Spirit in her inner being, so that Christ may dwell in her heart through faith. And I pray that she, being rooted and established in love, 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, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that she may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.



5:15-20 (ACTS 2:1-13)

BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT



Isn't this exciting? The day the Holy Spirit came on the church so they would know God is with them; so that they would be filled with his presence; so that they would be empowered to do everything he was asking them to do. Whether they had walked with Jesus or not, whether they had seen Jesus or not, whether they had known Jesus or not. Are you excited?

What do you do when you are excited? I bet some of you do some silly things when you are excited. All of us can be a bit weird, if we're honest. But the reasons we behave like that, the excitement

about something that lies behind it, well that is all absolutely wonderful.

I wonder what the main ways are that you would identify someone as a Christian. Is it that they go to church on Zoom? That they talk to you about Jesus and tell you what they have been praying about, or reading in the bible and other books about God?

Well strangely and surprisingly enough, if we look at the early church, perhaps even the main sign is that it looked like God's Spirit was at work in them. Later in Acts Peter will go to the house of some Gentiles, and as Peter preaches the gospel the Spirit of God is poured out on them, and they speak in tongues and praise God. And Peter says, "Surely no-one can stand in the way of them being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." Is it interesting or surprising to you, like it is to me, that Peter doesn't say "they have believed the gospel," or "they have repented of their sin", or whatever it might be, but "they have received the Holy Spirit." There's not been any time to suggest any fruit in their lives from the Holy Spirit being in them: it just looks like they have received it!

In Acts 10 the Holy Spirit causes the Gentiles to speak in tongues and praise God. In Acts 2 the disciples speak in tongues when the Spirit fills them. In Ephesians 5 Paul connects being filled with the Spirit with speaking in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs – that might be singing in tongues as well. Look at what God's people do when they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Look at the way it is expressed exuberantly and audibly. Look at the expectation that all of this will be at least a little bit... exciting.

if all this looks just a little bit strange to you, then don't worry: it has *always* been strange.

finds quite a list of them. Immoral, impure, greedy, those come three times in Ephesians 4 and 5 – obscenity, foolish talk, coarse joking – last week we talked about falsehood, anger, stealing, and you get the feeling that Paul’s list is probably a bit longer than that.

So for all this list, what’s striking is how Paul offers few practical solutions to all these problems. That’s what we said last week. *You know this stuff*, Paul was saying to them. But please don’t think that Paul does just leave us to fend for ourselves. He has something to offer his children, one thing which he is convinced will transform everything for the Ephesians, something which millions of people who have tried to follow Jesus ever since will tell you is makes all the difference. *Bring it into the light*, Paul says. *Tell someone*.

I’m convinced that bringing the things that we struggle with into the light – even though they might make us feel ashamed – robs them of their power. As I say that, I know you might be listening and wondering about a very specific something, and asking if it really is as simple as all that. It is. I know it from my own experience. Talking to someone doesn’t make it go away, but it is the main way that God brings things into the light. As we talk about it, not because we are so clever, but because God is so kind, it changes everything.

Bringing things into the light makes all the difference in the world. Paul says that it is the difference between being dead and alive: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Let Jesus in, friends: let him in to every corner. We said earlier that Jesus said he was the light of the world. Here is a famous picture of Jesus, based on the words of the bible in Revelation 3: ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. You’ll see from the picture that Jesus is carrying a light: it is called *The Light of the World*. The weeds have grown up in front of the door; it hasn’t been open in a while. The door has a handle, but only on the inside. We are to open it, and allow Jesus’s light into our darkness. And if we do, he will come in and eat with us.



Do you have someone to talk to?



4:1-8

ONE



Here are some amazing facts about the number 1:

I: The Ancient Greeks thought 1 was not a number at all, because there was only of them/it!

II: The number one is not considered to be a prime number, because it can’t be divided by any whole number other than itself.

III: One is the only number which, when written in English, is in reverse alphabetical order!

In Ephesians 4, Paul begins by telling us he is in prison. He followed Jesus even if it meant imprisonment, and he urges us in turn to follow him by living a life worthy of our calling. He goes on to give us a whole list of ‘ones’ (at least in the English translation we most often use). Here they are.

1. *One Another*: Bear with one another in love. Some of us are a bit cooped up at the moment... some people in the village are getting a bit grumpy on social media. We are one body – that’s why we are humble and gentle, patient and bear with one another. If one bit of our body went wrong the rest of our body wouldn’t pick on it, or exclude it etc – we bear with one another because we are one body.

2. *One Body*. We are gathering together online as one body, one church. We are one body because we are the body of Christ, we are one body because we have one Spirit. Recently we have reminded ourselves that the Holy Spirit we have is the

same one who raised Christ from the dead. No-one has a better or different Holy Spirit from you. He is *there*. Because we have one Spirit, we are one even though we cannot be together, and we have hope.

3. *One Hope*. We have one hope – we are followers of Jesus, and *whatever* happens to us in the weeks to come we have eternity to look forward to, we are a people of hope, our currency is hope. If you don't know this hope, follow Jesus today! He is God's hope for eternity for us as we follow him.

4. Jesus is the *one Lord*. We were praying the other day, and someone reminded us that Coronavirus is not Lord. Jesus is Lord. We have hope because Jesus is Lord.

5. We have *one faith*. It is so good to hear of so many churches joining together in prayer and in lots of ways, recognising that we have one faith. We have one faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose for us, lives amongst us, who is with us, and has not abandoned us. Christ promises that whatever comes we will be forever with him.

6. We have *one baptism*. Sometimes I ask people if they have been baptised and they say, well I was christened. You have, then! Sometimes people say they were baptised in the Catholic church, or immersed as an adult or whatever. That's baptism too! They all count the same, because we are baptised into Jesus. We go down into his death, we come up in his resurrection. We are baptised into God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is an outward sign of what God has done in our hearts. Again, he can do that in our hearts today.

7. If we are baptised in Jesus' name, we have *one God who is Father* of all. If we have one Father, we are a family. We are a big and slightly complicated family, but we are the big family of God. We talked last week about how we can come to our Father, pray to our Father, always be with our Father. Some of us are learning the delights of *always* being with our earthly Father this week. For my children that is a mixed experience! But to be in the presence of our Father God, to sit and be with him, is only ever *good*.

And because God is our Father, and he always gives good gifts to his children, he gives grace to each one of us. God has not passed any of you by. If you believe in Jesus he won't. But as he gives grace to each of us, it is a gift to do something with. So what is he calling you to do today?

Looking at the reading, – what does it mean to you today to live a life worthy of the calling you have received?

Which of these words challenges you most today? Humble, gentle, patient, love, unity, peace.

Use the image of baptism to picture yourself being with Jesus in his death, and now in his resurrection. Get in touch if you'd like to be baptised as soon as we can meet together again.



5:1-14 LIVE IN THE LIGHT

We're back in the same meaty chunk of Ephesians we looked at last week, where we noticed how following Jesus is about putting away the old, and living in the new. *Be made new*, Jesus says to us. Today we are going to think a bit about being in the light, not in the dark. We are going to see how Jesus calls us out of the dark, and into the light. He calls us to put away every little bit of our lives which look a bit like the dark, and live in the light.

Sometimes in the lockdown I have to admit to feeling like retreating to a very dark and quiet place. There are a couple of advantages to being there – did I mention it is quiet? – but there are also a couple of major disadvantages. I can't see anything, I can't do very much, and I suspect it is not going to be very good for me if I stay there very long. But you can see the attraction to being in the dark, at least for a moment.

It's clear from this paragraph that although the invitation is exciting, it is also serious business. You see, hidden there again is the idea that the Ephesians want to live as children of light, want to please God, but still manage to find all kinds of ways not to. It reminds us of another famous passage in Romans 7, where Paul laments the inner wrestling he does not to do the things he doesn't want to, but the ones he does. I don't know if you are like that. I know sometimes I do the right thing quite easily. Others I really wrestle with the wrong thing, but manage not to do it in the end. Sometimes I lie on the mat and let the wrong thing jump all over me.

That's why Paul tells them to find out what pleases God. He knows they don't always, and like any parent he knows a child constructively occupied is far less likely to get in trouble elsewhere. And trouble there is for sure, popping up through all of this passage today and last week too. All sorts of opportunities to find something to do other than what pleases God. Paul

Spirit. Where should I know better?" Paul says to them take off the old life, and put on the new one. We've heard what the old life can be marked by, but what about the new? We know to take off anger and unwholesome talk and so on, but what do we put on?

Here we come to the lovely conclusion of this passage, which acts as a kind of bridge between this week's reading and the next one... Paul says to them, "Put these things on. Put on compassion, and kindness, put on forgiveness and love. Where before we knew what *not* to do, let's think now about what we *are* to do, which is to follow God's example.

Because God's response to the things we get wrong—the things we have been talking about—is not to be angry and rage against us, but to forgive and to love, to be compassionate and kind. God will never once condone the ways we choose the old way of life over the new one, but he will also never condemn us. He will always forgive us and love us, be compassionate and kind to us. You know these things, he says to us, you know my ways.

How could God get rid of the old us without destroying us altogether? We come back to Jesus again—it's by having his son offer himself up in our place. That is kindness and compassion and forgiveness and love. It is not saying that the things that you get wrong, and that I get wrong, do not matter. It is God's son Jesus taking them on, paying the price for them, in our place. When we act like that we are following God's example, as children who are loved by their parents learn to love in their turn. Do these things, Paul says, and be the children of God.

Jesus does the work for us. On the cross, he comes and meets the old us, he takes it away and sorts it out, and makes it into something new. So why don't we always just trade the old things in? Why do we stick with our anger, and arguing, and dishonesty, or whatever else it might be? We could go for kindness and compassion and forgiveness and love, but then again...

Here's a couple of ways you can pray:

1. Father, I confess I am like the people Paul first wrote to. I am someone who knows what it means to live the way of Christ, but in some respects I find it easier to live with the old self on and not the new one... thank you that you call me to a new life of kindness and forgiveness and compassion and love...

2. Father, I feel like I am hearing for the first time today the good news that Jesus died on the cross for me. There are lots of things that I wish I could get rid of, like the rubbish collectors coming to me and taking stuff away, and I am so relieved Jesus can do that for me... thank you that you call me too to a new life of kindness and forgiveness and compassion and love...

Father, send your Spirit on all of us. You poured it out on your Son, Christ Jesus. Pour it out on us now as we are gathered in his name. Make us new.



4:7-16 FIVE THINGS THAT BUILD GOD'S CHURCH



Last time we looked at what we have in common: all the ways that the church is one. All the ways we are being built together. We are one because we have One Spirit, One Hope, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One Father. We are one because we have one another. We are one because we are one body. God wants to build his body, and he wants to use us all to do it. We all have jobs to do.

We are called to be apostles and pastors and evangelists and shepherds and teachers. It's for each of us as we follow Jesus.

As I go through this list, think a little of what sounds like you. No-one has just one of these things, but we are all one or two more than others. We've put a link here to a survey you could use to find out more, but in the meantime If you're not sure, ask someone in your family or a friend. Do a questionnaire – there is a link to one of them at the end of this section: you could do it and chat with someone about it.

But in the meantime here are some hints for you.

You might be more of an apostle. Apostles are like the itchy feet of the church. Always wanting to take us to new places and break new ground for God and his kingdom.

Or you might be a prophet. They're something like the eyes and ears. Prophets are people who see vision, and hear from God about what is on his heart. They can often step back and see the big picture of where we are and what needs to be done.

Or an evangelist. Like the hands reaching out with the good news of Jesus. Evangelists are not just standing-up-talking-about-Jesus people; they are anyone who connects new people with Jesus in any way.

Or a shepherd. We could say pastor, but that gives us 2 "P"s and that might get confusing! This is the heart. Shepherds are marked by tenderness, meeting need, providing comfort and encouragement. Sometimes people with this calling are more comfortable within the church

than pushing outwards, but their role is incredibly valuable.

Or a teacher. Maybe this is the mouth – the part of the church that speaks the truth about God and helps others to understand it. Perhaps a teacher is also a mouth because a teacher needs to feed on God's Word themselves before they share it with others.

Through the whole of this letter, Paul has been talking about how amazing the church is. It's for the church that Jesus has been put over all things (1:22); it's through the church that God's wisdom is to be made known to everyone (3:10); it's in the church that God's glory is to be revealed (3:21). And now Paul says, it is by being one, it is by building each other up with these ministries that we will be full of Christ. Do you want our churches to be full of Christ? Then let's be the apostles and pastors and prophets and evangelists and teachers we are called to be!

Because as we are built up, and as we join up, we grow up. There's not to be a bit of our life together which, as we exercise the ministries God has given us, is not to grow and build into maturity. When you picture the human body I hope you see something really important, which is that each part is just as important as the next. Don't think – a heart is more important than a mouth, or an eye is more important than a foot – just think how we would notice the difference if any of them was missing.

Churches without any one of these five things... are just not the full picture. So let's not leave anyone out – perhaps because they are different from us – and let's not leave ourselves out of the picture either. If you are sitting there this morning thinking I am nothing more than a little bit of gristle in this whole picture, notice that Paul mentions you too: the church is "joined and held together by every supporting ligament." Every part counts. Every ligament counts.

Some of you will need to ask the question of yourself that I asked earlier. Remember how those ministries of apostle and prophet and evangelist and shepherd and teacher are given to each one? Some of you will need to begin to dig into which of these things God is calling you to. Some of you know, and you will need to go back and go deeper and ask God to use them more and more so that his church will grow to maturity.

Some of you are watching, and wondering if God would ever use you. You have heard about the joining ligament, and think, even that is a bit of a stretch. But we need you. We will only grow into the church God is calling us to be, if you are who God is calling you to be. So today let's ask his Spirit to fill you, to work in you, to release that ministry in you.

And hello to any of you reading this who are just wondering if the church is a place you could belong, and Jesus is a person you could belong to. Well you can. You can say, I want to be part of Jesus's body today. The best decision that you'll ever make, the only one that lasts forever, can begin just by saying "I want to be part of Jesus's body today."

- Which of these five ministries are you? Check it out online at www.fivefoldsurvey.com/
- If you wonder if God might ever use you, remember that we need you to be who God is calling you to be, and ask him to begin to show you what that is.
- Perhaps you need to begin by telling Jesus that you want to be part of his body today.



4:17-5:2

BE MADE NEW

A couple of talks now on a big, meaty chunk of Ephesians, which shows us Paul's desperation, really, that the church will be what it is supposed to be. Paul looks at the church, and he can see both all of its potential, everything that is wonderful about it, and all of the challenges. And if you read over this passage, you'll see that it is marked with a kind of catalogue of all that Paul has observed amongst followers of Jesus that can keep them from being what they could be.

Rather than working through them one at a time, we are going to take 2 pictures which Paul uses in chapters 4 and 5, which show us how God is calling us to live for Jesus, and put away the things that prevent that. Next week we are going to talk about how following Jesus is not about living in the darkness, but the light. We are going to talk about living in the light. But for this week, we'll focus on a picture that comes earlier in the passage. We are to "Be made new." Be made new, Paul says to the Ephesians. Be made new, Jesus says to us.

Remember that when Paul writes these words he is addressing Christians. We might think that someone *without* Jesus is the "old person", and someone *with* Jesus is the "new person". But here is Paul writing to the church and saying, put off the old self and put on the new one. Paul is saying to them that even though when they turned to Jesus, they were made new by him, they can still live as if this is not the case, and keep the old self on rather than the new one.

And he thinks that they know. He thinks that these followers of Jesus know deep down that there is a better way. In verse 20, Paul writes to the Ephesians some vital words: "That is not the way of life you learned." Or to put it another way, "You know this stuff." You know that these things are not connected with the new you, but the old one. The Gentiles do those things because they don't know better. *You know this stuff.* Anger and unwholesome talk and falsehood and stealing and bitterness and malice... you get the sense he could go on. Paul giving us a few examples, and I am sure there could be more, to encourage the Ephesians to ask themselves, "Where should I know better? I have a conscience, enlivened by God's