

I have heard of your faith

This morning's sermon will be quite personal. I want to speak from the second half of Ephesians chapter one about my calling and your calling, and I want to make it highly personal. Paul says in verses 15 and 16 of Ephesians 1: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." Those words sum up for me my calling to minister among you, a congregation of faithful believers, whose faith I had heard of long before I ever laid eyes on your tired building or stepped inside its doors.

Te Atatu Bible Chapel was known to me 20 years ago when Brian Hathaway ministered among you, because my father and mother led a church into the charismatic renewal movement and faced many of the same questions you did as a church through the 1970's and 80's. Brian's voice on issues facing churches that encountered the charismatic movement stimulated conversations nationwide, and beyond. For those of you who don't know, I also met Brian during his time as national Principal for Bible College of New Zealand, while I was on the board for the Nelson branch of the College. I admired his very genuine way with people, and his clear conceptual mind on Christian leadership concerns.

The chapel was known to me 15 years when I got to know Glen Hathaway, and Lyndsay Simpkin, through Christian outdoor conferences in the central North Island. The chapel was known to me 5 years ago as I sat around the boardroom table at Laidlaw College with Matt Hakiha, adding our 2 cents worth to the governance of that institution, with Matt as a member of the College Rununga, and I as a student representative on the board.

So I have crossed paths with people from the chapel, and the chapel has been known to me, for many years. And I can say to you as Paul says to the Ephesians, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints." I *had* indeed heard of your faith, of your commitment to the Word and the Spirit, and your concern for your community. Praise God for that.

My calling to pray for you

But Paul goes on. In the same breath he adds, "and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." My calling to minister among you is to give thanks for you daily and remember you in my prayers. I mean that. Those are words that are easily spoken and not so easily undertaken. In the thick of ministry – which fast becomes management, meetings, and mundane administration – my first call is to pray. I mentioned a while ago during a workshop style service with you on prayer, that when I responded to a prompting from God last year to consider an active preaching and teaching ministry among his people, it was impresses on me at the time that my first responsibility was to pray because prayer for the people of God opens me up to the love of God for his people – and no minister of the gospel can preach or teach without knowing God's heart for his people and hearing his word for them from a place of prayer.

I have been called to pray first and preach second; to love first and lead second. This is why inside the cover of the blue clear leaf administrative folder that some of you will know I carry everywhere – I have written the words: “To preach I must pray; to lead I must love.”

Paul has prompted me this week to consider again my calling among you. It would be wrong of me to preach the word of God from Ephesians this week if I read straight past such an obvious reminder that a servant of the gospel is first and foremost a person of prayer. How can I tell you that Paul prayed for the Ephesian church, or interpret this for you, with any integrity if I do not pray for you? Ephesians chapter one has struck me this week as I have prepared to preach on it. God demands that I live it, not just preach it, and in a moment as I expound on your calling from Ephesians he will demand that you live it also, and not just hear it. If we are honest there is often a gap between what we are called to and what we do. Paul himself admitted this when he wrote in Romans: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” We too must admit our struggle.

Let me honestly state then my challenge: Prayer *is* hard work, as you no doubt also find. The demands of a job press for action much more than they press for prayer. It is possible to write whole sermons without a moment of prayer, but it is a great mistake to do so. A well prepared sermon can hide a great deal, and I might teach you all kinds of interesting things through hours in the study, but a well prepared sermon cannot hide a poverty of prayer, or a dry spiritual condition. And it cannot speak to hearts unless the preacher has spoken with God. Hours in the study are worth nothing without time in prayer. So I ask you to pray for me, that I might learn again how to pray consistently for those God has called me to serve. Paul asked his churches to pray for him, that he might be faithful in his calling. In Ephesians 6 he says: “Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.” He knew that he was dependent on the prayers of the people. I ask you to pray for me, that I may be faithful to God’s calling. And I promise to pray for you as God has called me to, with the help of his Spirit.

Your Calling to know God

If the passage this morning tells me what God wants for me, it also tells me what God wants for you. Ephesians 1, not only speaks to me of my calling, it also speaks to me of your calling. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian church here in chapter one sums up what you are called to. Listen to what he prays:

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” (Eph 1:17-19).

Your calling is summed up in this prayer. It is calling of every community of believers. As those who are in Christ, you are called to a deep and profound knowledge of God, thorough wisdom and revelation given to you by the Spirit of God. Paul understands that growth in the Christian life entails growth in comprehension and appreciation of what God has done for us in Christ, and it involves a true spiritual awakening to all that God has given us through his incredible grace. Paul wants the Ephesians to wake up to what they possess in Christ. And this, in a sense, is what the Christian journey of faith is all about.

What we have in Christ

So what do we have in Christ. The first half of Ephesians 1, which Stu preached on last week, spells out precisely what God has given us through Jesus. Let me remind us. In Christ we have, according to verse 3, “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” And in Christ we were chosen, says verse 4, “before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” And in Christ, in verse 5, we have been adopted, “as his children...according to the good pleasure of his will.” And in Christ we have, in verse 7, “redemption through his blood, [and] the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.” And in Christ we have received, “an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,” says verse 11. And in Christ, according to verse 13, we have been “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; [as] the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people.”

So in Christ we have received: every spiritual blessing, election as the people of God, adoption as his children, redemption through Jesus’ blood, the forgiveness of sins, an eternal inheritance, and the gift of the Holy Spirit sealing us for the day of redemption. No wonder Paul wants the Ephesian church to know what they possess in Christ. No wonder he wants the eyes of their heart to be enlightened. If you wonder what it is God has given you through faith in Jesus Christ, read Ephesians 1 slowly, placing yourself as the recipient of every blessing that Paul mentions – and if you do not begin to marvel at the expansiveness of God’s gifts and grace towards you, start again, and pay more attention.

An appeal to know who we are in Christ

I believe that you, the people of Te Atatu Bible Chapel, are called to appreciate what you have in Jesus Christ as strongly as I believe that I, Jim McInnes, am called to pray for you. I also know that Christians can be as blind to what they have received in Christ, as they can be neglectful of prayer. If it was guaranteed that the church of Jesus Christ would always fully know what it had received from him, then Paul would not bother to tell the Ephesians that he was praying for them to receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that they would see all this. The fact is, we sometimes don’t see, just like we sometimes don’t pray. If I can admit a poverty of prayer, you can admit doubts, spiritual blindness, and any faith struggles. We can be honest and authentic. But we need not sit in despair.

My message to you is that you are the church of Jesus Christ and together we can grow in our appreciation of “the hope to which he has called [us]...the riches of his glorious inheritance among us...and the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”

God can and does open spiritual eyes, he can and does enable us to pray, he can and does fill us with hope. And he can and does draw us into deeper places where we truly become the dwelling place of God - which Ephesians 2:22 states as the church's vocation. And as the dwelling place of God we can truly know his power and love. Wherever God dwells he fills with his glory, his goodness, and his redeeming grace.

Christians sometimes read the words of verse 18, "the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints," and think that the inheritance being spoken of is our inheritance, like the inheritance mentioned in verse 14, "the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption." But listen carefully to whose inheritance Paul speaks of in verse 18: He prays that the Ephesians may know "the riches of *his* glorious inheritance among the saints," meaning God's inheritance. As one commentator says "Because of his choosing, redeeming, adopting, and sealing [of] us, we are God's possession." If he has claimed us as his own inheritance, how jealously do you think he intends to guard our salvation and glorify himself in us?

My sermon today is a simple appeal to be prepared to know God in new ways. I say this because Ephesians begs us to ask for this, and it begs us to understand that we have only begun to realize the call of God to his people, and the treasure we have in Jesus Christ. We will be studying Ephesians together for some time, and as we do so we will be exploring and unfolding the nature of the church as God speaks of it through Paul to a church just like us – full of fallen human beings who need to be reminded to love their wives, respect their husbands, not live according to their pagan neighbours, not beat their slaves, or provoke their children, or speak evil of one another. The picture of the church in Ephesians is both glorious and grotty. It is a picture of people in need of transformation. But it also promises victory, and a glorious inheritance – beginning today. It is picture of fallenness and incredible grace; of sin and redemption; of brokenness and breathtaking promises. Many of these promises are for the present, not just for the future. Ephesians tells us what we have already received and can learn to walk in.

The Te Atatu Bible Chapel context

As we journey through Ephesians, the desire of the elders and myself is to begin to speak directly into the Te Atatu Bible Chapel context. You are not just any church, or the church in general, you are a particular church in a particular time and place, and you are people "chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love," as verse 4 says. So you are here, with a calling, to know God and to make him known. This study of Ephesians should speak to you, in your context.

My sense when I joined you in September last year is that this church needs a mirror held up to it, not to frighten it with its bad hair do – all of us have a bad spiritual hair do, as we've admitted; but to help you celebrate what God is doing in your midst; to recognize where God is already at work among you as a believing community; and to see your unique calling as a church within this specific local community.

It is one thing to study Scripture, as we have been doing with the book of Mark, and largely focus on its original context. But it is important to move from that context to today – to apply the Gospels, or the New Testament letters, or any other part of Scripture that we explore, to our time and place, and to us. To be faithful to scripture we must be true to its original meaning; but to be led by it into the purposes of God for us today we must ask the question – what does it show us as a mirror? What does it demand of us as the Word of God in our time and place? How does it call us to respond here and now as the people of God? We must see ourselves and our surroundings in light of Scripture. I ask us, as a church, to consider deeply such things as our current condition as a community of believers, our reality, our precious people, our history, our future, our present challenges – but above all, our glorious calling to know Christ and to display the love of God in Te Atatu Peninsula, Te Atatu South, and wherever we live, work, or walk the dog.

What is the place of the church?

If you wonder what the connection is between an imperfect church, like us, and the lofty language of Ephesians where we see the perfection of the Son of God, the one who we know can make all things new, then listen to the last portion of the Ephesians text for today. After Paul tells the church that he prays for them to know the hope, the riches, and the immeasurable power of God, he goes on to say:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:20-23)

Christ is truly exalted here. His perfect sacrifice for our sake was honoured by an exaltation to a position of absolute authority over everything in heaven and on earth. I read a nice succinct statement this week of the importance of Jesus exaltation (or ascension), “The resurrection proclaims ‘he lives’; the exaltation proclaims ‘he reigns.’” In the language of Psalm 110, where it says “The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool,’” which Jesus himself quotes during his ministry, Paul in Ephesians now picks up the same language by speaking of Christ at God’s right hand, with all things under his feet. This simply means that he has subjected his enemies and now reigns supreme, or as Chapter 4 of Ephesians says that when he ascended he “make captivity itself a captive,” bringing under his authority particularly every spiritual being that seeks to oppose God. And he does this for the sake of his people. After it says he “ascended on high [and] made captivity itself captive, Paul writes “he gave gifts to his people.” The ascension of Jesus to a position of authority and the distribution of gifts and authority to the church are explicitly linked, which Eugene Peterson puts nicely in his translates this verse by saying: “He climbed the high mountain, He captured the enemy and seized the booty, He handed it all out in gifts to the people.” But we don’t need to go to Ephesians 3 to learn this, because here in Ephesians 1 it is perfectly clear. Who has God made Jesus head over all things for, according to verse 22? “...he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things *for the church* [pause] which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

The last verse in chapter one of Ephesians is in many ways the most remarkable. It is for our sake that Christ has been made head over all things. Why? Because his work was the work of redemption, and we are the redeemed. He bears authority in order to invest it in his church, so that through a redeemed people God might glorify himself. How else can we understand the church described as “the fullness of him who fills all in all.” You are God’s way of filling creation with his glory. You are an extension of the redemptive work of God through Jesus Christ. As Jesus’ body, you exercise the authority that subjects all things to the will of God – and you do so firstly by submitting yourself to the will of God, by obedience to him, by responding to his Holy Spirit. With the eyes of your heart enlightened, so that faith, hope and love are manifest within you, and the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead at work within you, how can you do anything but extend the glory of God throughout his creation.

So, we the church are not just waiting for the end, where we will be made perfect like the one we worship. No, right now, the church is the imperfect yet glorious expression of God’s sovereign rule on earth through Jesus Christ. When we pray “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we need to understand that because, according to Ephesians 2:6 we are already seated with Christ in the heavenly places, and share every spiritual blessing belonging to him, the answer to that prayer is the exercise the authority we have been given in Jesus Christ here and now. God does not answer that prayer by acting independently of his people. Rather, he responds by saying, “on earth then, through you who are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, as it is in those heavenly places.”

If the power of God that raised Christ from the dead is at work among us, which is what verses 19 and 20 are on about, and this immeasurably great power can “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,” as Ephesians 3 tells us, then be prepared to truly glorify God in this life. The whole point of Ephesians is that here and now we may know the fullness of God’s power and love.

Application

What might this mean in practical expression? Well, to take up a theme that Ephesians focuses on in a major way on, we now have true authority in the spiritual realm, over the demonic principalities and powers that are named in chapter 6, and are spoken of here in chapter 1 as authorities, powers, and dominions. Spiritual forces and demonic beings do exist and they actively oppose the will and purposes of God. One of God’s intentions for his people is that they take up arms against the enemy and exercise in Christ true spiritual authority over the evil one. The Ephesian Christians needed to know this because many would have been heavily mixed up in magic practices. They feared the spiritual powers of this age.

What is our magic, so to speak? What evil forces do we need to come out from under and do battle with? I suggest that for Christians in the comfortable west, consumerism and complacency are the powers that we serve. Materialism is the magic of today. Spending is the spirit of this age. And Christian complacency, as a result of such compromised gospel living, is one of the great enemies of the church in our context. We too have a fight with the devil – it is just a different kind of fight. But Ephesians tells us that Christ who won the battle has empowered us to overcome.

All things, including the demonic lie of consumerism, and the lethal lethargy that creeps into our faith, are under Christ's feet. And the reason we know that we can defeat these enemies and any others that seek to rob the children of God of their inheritance in Christ is because of an astounding relationship between Christ and the church. So, pray not only for me, but also for yourselves, as I pray for you, that your eyes would truly be opened to see the riches that we have in Christ. That way we will seek another kind of riches from what the world seeks and places confidence in. The Ephesian church needed to know that there was another kind of power than the spiritual powers they had formerly feared and served through magic practices, so Paul spoke to them of the authority and power of God that was available to them in Christ. We, as a spiritually complacent consumerist people need to know of another kind of riches from that which can creep into a place a dominion in our lives. We need to know the riches of belonging to God as his beloved inheritance. That way our allegiance shifts and we begin to take up the authority we have been given to defeat the enemy who is already under the feet of Christ. Let us place him under our feet also, because we too are seated with Christ.