



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Tim Howles

Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

I'd like us to turn this morning to our second reading, chapter 1 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

I think this is one of the deepest, most wonderful descriptions of the Christian faith to be found anywhere in Scripture. It gives us a sort of panorama of what God has done for us in the past, what it means to be a Christian now, and what is to come in the future. It is glorious stuff. As we read and reflect upon these words as Christians it should set our pulses racing!

In fact, I think that must have been happening to the author too, even as he wrote these words, because in the original Greek this is one, long sentence; it's as if Paul could barely pause or take breath as these words spilled out. It's no wonder that in a few verses time he puts down his pen and simply prays that we would have "power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge" (3:18-19). As the NT scholar N. T. Wright says: "glory, wonder, amazement seeps out of every word that Paul writes here: has ever such a sentence been composed in the whole history of the world?"

And we can only scratch the surface this morning.

But let's start at the beginning. The tone is set by that very first statement in verse 3:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (1:3)

Paul begins by reminding the Christians in Ephesus of two things. First, they have available to them "every spiritual blessing" they might need. And second, all that comes "in Christ". And that second thing is the key to understanding the first. The Christians in Ephesus were not particularly impressive in number or in political power. But Paul tells them that they have the power to change the world. Not because of their own strength, but because there are "in Christ". To be a Christian is to have available to you massive resources of power. But this power is not from ourselves; it comes because we are united with somebody else.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Do any of you watch the BBC series *Poldark*? I'm not a great fan really, but Sarah has been watching a bit, which means I have to as well! The series is set in eighteenth-century Cornwall. Ross Poldark is a wealthy landowner. But he falls in love with a poor scullery maid, Demelza, who is from a much lower socio-economic class. And amazingly, they get married. And as soon as that happens, the wealth, the status and the honour that belonged to Poldark is transferred to Demelza. All that was his becomes hers, and her life is transformed forever as a result.

The Bible often uses the image of marriage to describe what it means to be a Christian. To become a Christian is to be united with Christ. And that means that everything that belongs to Christ now belongs to you.

That's why the Apostle Paul says that "every spiritual blessing" is available to us when we are "in Christ". All that is His becomes ours, and our lives are transformed forever as a result.

OK, but what are those blessings?

Well, we could have two, three, four or ten sermons looking at them all. But here, very briefly, are three.

First of all, *redemption*. In verse 7 Paul says: "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins".

When I was at university, I left my bike chained up on some railings when I went into a pub, ignoring a sign that clearly warned me of the consequences of doing so. When I came out, some hours later, the bike lock had been cut and the bike had been removed. I had to go all the way over to the other side of Cambridge and pay £30 to get it back. And when I paid my money, they gave me a receipt, and on it they stamped the word "redeemed". You see, my bike had been in captivity, and a price had to be paid to free it. And ever since I've thought that was a great illustration of Christianity. The Bible says that we too are in captivity. Who to? We are slaves to sin. We have all turned away from the God who made us, and followed instead the devices and desires of our own hearts. But God who is rich in mercy sent His Son into the world to pay the ransom for our sin, so that we can be forgiven and set free. Just as the people of Israel had been redeemed from their captivity in Egypt, so Christians are redeemed from their captivity to sin and set free, liberated, to live in a new way.

So that's redemption. But here's the second spiritual blessing: *adoption*. In verse 5 Paul says: "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ" (1:5).

In the ancient world, a lot depended on your family name. You might come from a lowly or a dishonourable family. But to be adopted was to be given a new name and a new inheritance. And the same is true for us. Wherever we have come from, whatever we've done in the past, when you turn to Christ you are given a new name. And that means we don't have to worry and be anxious about our status, our money, our power like other people are. Not at all. Because we have been adopted. And so our identity is given to us by God. As Paul says elsewhere: "you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear; you have received a spirit of adoption as sons, by which we cry out: *Abba! Father!*" (Rom 8:15). Can you imagine how our lives would be different if we understood that?

And one more for you. For at the end of our passage, Paul looks forward to the consummation of our faith. Verse 10: “in Christ, God has revealed his plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10). To be a Christian can be hard. It will cost us time and money. We struggle to live distinctive lives, not merely going with the culture around us. We might be mocked and ridiculed. But Paul reminds us that our final destiny is to be gathered up in Christ, and to live with Him in fullness of joy, on a healed Earth, where there will be no more sickness or mourning or crying or pain. Again, can you imagine how that vision of the future would change our lives now, if we truly believed it?

Redemption. Adoption. Consummation. Just three things from this passage. There are many more.

In our car we have a CD of Christian music for children, and one of the songs Thea listens to all the time is called “great words that end in –tion”. Substitution. Salvation. Justification. Imputation. Sanctification. Resurrection. They’re all here in this passage. Thea is learning them. Can we? And so my challenge to us this week is to spend 5 minutes every evening with Ephesians 1 in front of you, to think and pray about these great words that end in -tion. And see how your life is changed!

May I finish with a story.

In 1951, a young lady called Thelma Howard entered the employment of Walt Disney. And for thirty years Thelma served as live-in housekeeper, cook and maid. She was very popular with the family, including Walt, Lilian his wife, and their two children, who called her “our real-life Mary Poppins”. Every year, to show his gratitude, Walt would reward Thelma with a gift of stock in his company. Of course, Thelma didn’t understand what company shares were and didn’t know what to do with them. She left the certificates in an envelope under her bed. Thelma lived to be 80 years old, eventually moving to Kansas City, and dying in 1994. In her will she left her modest amount of possessions to a local charity for disadvantaged and homeless children. When the certificates were finally discovered, it was found that she actually had a fortune of over \$90 million. She had never realised.

Christian brothers and sisters, we have available to us spiritual resources of which we can barely imagine the extent. Will we hide them under the bed? Or will we understand what is already in our possession and go out into the world to live lives that give glory to Christ and proclaim His name to the world?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon preached on Sunday 15 July 2018, the Seventh Sunday of Trinity