

Living in Christ – Our Role in God’s Big Story

Stevie Walker, 29 July 2012, St Michael’s Kelburn

Ephesians 1:1 – 2:10

Introduction:

This is the first instalment in a series of five weeks looking at the book of Ephesians. Today I want to explore what it means to be “living in Christ” (as Paul repeatedly puts it), and the implications of this as we seek to discover our role in God’s big story.

I will be back next week to look at “unity in Christ” – the church – which is really about the application and detail of what I will be talking about today.

An important part of my preparation for these sermons has been to sit down and study these passages with my Life Group that meets on Wednesday evenings. I am thankful for their thoughts, questions and observations and this sermon is a product of that time spent together in prayer and reading the bible together.

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Following completion of my Bachelor of Arts at Victoria University, in 2006 I undertook a two year ministry internship programme with Tertiary Students Christian Fellowship. There were a lot of ups and downs for me over those two years, but one of the most profound moments was right at the very beginning when I was asked to prepare a group bible study on Ephesians chapter one.

I spent a number of weeks pouring over this passage as I wanted to make a good impression on the people running the training programmes and the other ministry interns (or “minterns” as we were called). During my time studying this passage, unexpectedly almost, I

was being struck with a real sense of God's greatness and his sheer loving generosity. This is something that has stuck with me over the past six years and it is for that reason that this has become one of my favourite passages in the bible.

But Ephesians is a letter that can be deeply troubling to many people. The passages about slaves and women appear to be widely at odds to what we consider to be fair, just and loving. These were issues that were raised by members of my Life Group.

Some scholars have also questioned the authenticity of the book and whether Paul actually wrote it – they raise textual and other issues. I don't intend to go into these issues in any depth today, except to say that that I, for one, am convinced that Paul did write the letter and that there are very good reasons for this.

(Also, the passages that address slaves and women will be addressed in weeks to come, so much sure you make it along to the whole series!)

Context:

One of the interesting features of the letter to the Ephesians is the lack of personal address or comment. Most of Paul's letters give greetings to specific people and address specific issues that are going on in the church communities he is writing to. But in Ephesians, after giving a brief introduction, Paul only mentions Tychicus, who is delivering the letter (along with Paul's letter to Philemon and possibly his letter to the Colossians) and probably reading it out.

Yet Ephesus and the surrounding area were very well known to Paul as Acts records that he spent nearly three years preaching in and around Ephesus. Ephesus was in fact one of the major centres of early Christianity and features prominently in the New Testament.

The letter to the Ephesians, then, is more like a circular letter, a sermon designed to be read to a number of different congregations

than what it is a specific personal letter addressing a particular pastoral or theological issue that is troubling one of the churches. It was written around the same time as Colossians and Philemon, both of which address very specific and personal issues that needed to address. In modern terms it is more like a podcast meant for a wide audience than a SKYPE conversation to address a specific set of issues.

Paul is writing these letters while he is either in prison or under house arrest in Rome somewhere between 61 and 62 AD.¹

But as we read in Acts, the church in Ephesus was a church under pressure. It had to contend with the cult of Artemis, the followers of rioted when it was perceived that the Christian gospel was a threat.² The Jewish community in Asia minor (west Turkey) also objected strongly to the Christian gospel. It was Jews from this area that incited the riot and attempt to kill Paul in Jerusalem that lead to him appealing to have his case heard before the emperor, which is the reason he was in prison at this time.

This letter from Paul would have been a strong encouragement for them, especially as they would not have seen him in a long period of time.

Who Is Christ?

When we were studying today's passage in our Life Group, someone commented that Paul seemed excited by what he is saying here. It is likely that this letter was dictated by Paul. We can imagine him in his cell or room pacing around, speaking in a loud voice, arms flapping giving thanks to God and in passionate prayer for the people he is addressing.

¹ Luke could well have been with him during this period.

² Acts 19:24-41.

Ephesians is a letter that is grounded in the praise of God. Right after giving his opening greeting to his hearers, Paul bursts out into thanks to “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.3). In rapid succession he then states what he is thankful for and what God has achieved “in Christ”. In summary these are:

- We have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing.
- We were chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless.
- We were destined for adoption as his children.
- In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins.
- We have had the mystery of his will made known to us.
- We have been empowered to live for the praise of his glory.
- We have salvation.
- We have the Holy Spirit as a proof and down payment that all of this is true and will come to pass.

The key thing to notice here is that all of these things have happened “*in Christ*”. They have happened because God has shown us his great *generosity*.

Just think for a moment what it means for our salvation to be due to the good pleasure of his will. This is not the action of a God who is far off, distant, or disinterested. It is the action of a God who is passionate about restoring and rescuing his creation from all that is marring and destroying it.

This phrase, “in Christ” or “in him” is repeated nine times in the space of ten verses and represents a key idea in what Paul is saying.

But what does it mean to be “in Christ”?

Earlier this year I watched all of the Harry Potter films for the first time. In the series, when students first arrive at the Hogwarts School of wizardry and magic, they are placed into one of four “houses” Slitherin, Gryffindor, Raven’s Claw and Hufflepuff by the magical sorting hat. Each house has a head staff member and students compete during the school year for points. During the series, the different houses play a big part in the unfolding narrative, with those who are in Slitherin siding with the dark lord voldermrt, while the students that are in Gryffindor are opposed to voldermort and fight against him.

There is the idea inherent in the series that the actions and characteristic values of the house then shapes and becomes real to the students that are placed in the house.

Likewise in the bible there are numerous examples where a person, usually the king, action represents the nation of Israel and their actions have consequences for the nation as a whole.

For example in 2 Samuel 20:1 Sheba leads a revolt against King David and states “we have no portion in David, no share in the son of Jesse” so there is the sense that being representation. David represents the people to other nations but also to God. Likewise with Jesus, when we refer to him as “Christ”, the anointed one, the king, we are saying that he is the true representative of not only Israel, but of all of humanity.

This not merely symbolic, it also informs our prayer life and our spiritual experience of communion with the living God. Due to our union with Christ what is true of him is also now true of us, both as individuals but also as the church.

God’s Big Plan:

The climax of what Paul is saying here about what God has done “in Christ” is found in chapter one verse ten where he declares that “God

has made known to us the mystery of his will as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on Earth”. This is the coming of God’s kingdom, the time when all things will be put right with the world. The mystery of this, the thing that no one saw coming is that this would be achieved through God himself becoming fully human and dying on a cross.

The mystery deepens when we see that we are blessed not just for our own good, but so that we can participate in the process of God reconciling the world to himself. This is the reason we were chosen and for which we are predestined.

Predestination:

The idea of pre-destination is not one that sits easily and comfortably with us at times. The big question is that one of why some are picked and others are not.

We want to have choice and the idea that some may be excluded without any choice is offensive to us. But Paul’s focus here is not about who is in or out, it is about us who do know Christ, know him because he loves us and has revealed himself to us.

It is also a promise that he will persevere with us and wants us to be like him. He has chosen us not because we could do anything to deserve it but because he loves us.

He has made us his children and freed us from the hurt and shame of our sin – that is, not just our wrong actions but also the power of death.

Freedom in Christ, then, is at the heart of the Gospel and it is free. Grace is such a powerful message. Chapter 2, verse 8 says: “It is by grace that you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing – it is the gift of God.” These are some of the most powerful words in scripture.

It is this goal, this vision that gives shape to the rest of the letter and what Paul has to say. When we look at what God has achieved in Christ, the appropriate response, like Paul's, is to pray and give thanks. When Paul mentions Christ elsewhere in the letter, then, it is a short hand for saying all of this.

This big plan is the foundation for Paul of what it means to be the Church and also the foundation for how we live our lives in relation to those around us. Moreover we have the Holy Spirit as a guarantee, a down payment, that God will achieve this and make it happen.

This means that each time we experience the working of the Spirit or see him in other people's lives we are experiencing this future reality breaking into the present.

Paul's Prayer:

Paul then goes on to tell his hearers that he gives thanks for them and asks that the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened so that they may know the hope to which they have been called. In other words, he asks that all the things that he has said will become our reality.

In Jewish thought, the heart is the centre of your being. It is the place from where all of your motivation and desires flow. So when Paul prays that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened, he is praying that their lives, both individually and corporately, will be re-orientated around Christ. When they come to take actions and make decisions, they will do it not out of the social and cultural norms of the day, but out of a deep love of God and out of a desire to join in the work that he is already doing in the world. This will result in us having compassionate hearts and seeing each other through new eyes.

Who we are:

Given all that Paul has said about what has been achieved in Christ, it is not surprising that he has a very high view of the Church.

Look again the words of verses 22-23 where he says that “God has put all things under Christ’s feet for the sake of the Church, which is his body, the fullness for him who fills all in all.”

And then again in chapter 2 verse 10: “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

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When we studied this passage in our Life Group, the conversation ended up focusing on evangelism and about sharing the gospel with those around us. It was agreed that we all had people and opportunities to do this, but it was a question about how it does not seem a natural or easy thing to do. Perhaps this is an area that we need to focus on developing – how to share the Gospel in post-Christian New Zealand. We have an exciting and new mission field and we need to be joining together in prayer and asking to join into the work that God is already at work doing.

The vision of our parish is to “honour God and make followers of Jesus in Kelburn and beyond”. How does this happen? Or, in Paul’s terms: in what areas and in what ways do we need to have the “eyes of our hearts enlightened” so that we can act out of compassion, freedom and love and so do the good works God has prepared for us?

As we wrestle together with questions such as these, may God grant us the insight to know the depths and reality of what he has achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus. May we find our true identity in Christ. May we be re-orientated around him so that we can more and more work for the glory of his name as we await the day that we receive our inheritance and, at the fullness of time, see all things united together in Christ.

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