

Ephesians 1:1-14

On Monday evening I watched Miss Marple, Agatha Christie's detective programme. In the programme you saw Miss Marple's maid bringing her breakfast in bed on a tray with a letter on the tray. The maid commented on the fact that she had a letter. "is it from a secret admirer" she asked to which Miss Marple replied "no from an old friend." Do you get like that when someone else receives a letter you think I wonder who that's from. Sometimes when I get one I sit for a moment looking at the handwriting to see if I can work out who it was from.

Going back to Miss Marple as she opened the letter the maid was clearly looking over her shoulder. She wanted to know what was in the letter, Miss Marple reprimanded her saying "it isn't done to read other people's correspondence", which it didn't seem to worry the girl who then said "Rev 6:8, what does that mean." There was something in the letter she didn't understand but wanted to know about. To end idle curiosity Rev 6:8 says, "I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him" which gave the title of the book and film 'The Pale Horse'.

The maid knew who the letter was to but wondered who the letter was from, was eager to know what was in it and raised questions about the content of the letter.

Today we begin looking at the Letter to the Ephesians and as we do so I hope the same things apply.

Who was the letter for, it is addressed, v1, to the saints in Ephesus.

Ephesus was a multicultural, multi-faith city on the east side of what we know today as Turkey. Paul had been there on his third missionary journey.

The saints simply means those who have been made holy by Jesus, that is those who have been made aware of their sin, who have accepted that the death of Jesus on the cross is sufficient to pay the penalty for their sin and so through that have been made holy and acceptable in God's sight. In other words the letter as we look at the envelope was to all true believers in Jesus who were living in Ephesus at that time. As such we are as it were looking over their shoulders and reading what was written to them. Can I ask you to try and remember that all the way through this series which will stretch into 2011. The letter wasn't written to you. However what God had to say to these Christians in Ephesus can be of help to us but we must remember we are reading it over their shoulders.

With most of the letters I have received, unless I have guessed from the writing, I usually have to look at the end to see who sent it. Here we see who sent this letter in the first word. Paul who as we see and probably know was "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God". The letter came from Paul who had been the persecutor of the church but by the will and grace of God had met with Jesus on the road to Damascus and been turned round, coming to faith and then had been called to be an apostle and supremely an apostle to those who were not Jews, the gentiles.

So we see who the letter was to and who it was from. The maid was eager to know what Miss Marple's letter said. My prayer is that we will be eager to hear what this letter has to say and not just what it had to say to those first readers but what God wants to say to us through them. I know many of you will have read and studied this letter many times. I know you have heard me speak many times and I know that familiarity can create a kind of inertia. So my prayer and I hope you will join in this prayer is that God the Holy Spirit will open us to his word in a new way and will stir us and lead us into more of Christ as we study this letter together.

As we do look at the letter I'm sure that we will see things we don't understand and I hope that will encourage us to look a bit closer at the letter, to discuss it over coffee afterwards, to ask questions of each other and of me so that we hear what God was saying then and what he is saying now.

So we come to vs3-14 which in the Greek is one long sentence beginning with the word from which we get our word eulogy. And it is just that, a gushing river of praise to God.

Many years ago I visited a man who was going through a very tough time. He was a Christian but things were very hard for him. I tried to encourage him and then he said, "but what has God ever done for me – or what has he ever done for you?" What he was really saying was I have this problem and God isn't sorting it out. Because he was set on the physical and practical things I told him of some answers to prayer I'd had. What I didn't do and should have done was to lift his vision beyond the immediate and the problems that were his to the bigger picture of God and his grace towards us which goes beyond our present pains and problems and in the light of which we gain strength to cope with the present struggles.

What has God ever done for you, for me, for those Christians in Ephesus, for Paul?

V3, God, "has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." That sounds nice but what does it mean? It means that all the treasures of heaven have been opened to us who are "in Christ". To those who are followers of Jesus has been made available through the Holy Spirit all the good things of God, such as grace, peace, love and assurance and then, through prayer, the power and goodness of God. They may not sound very practical but those who have received them they are blessings of infinite value.

To explain these "blessings" further Paul tells these Christians of five things that God has done for them.

1. They have been chosen, v4"

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Before the creation of the world God chose these Christians and later us to be his children. This is why we receive God's blessings because we are favoured sons and daughters of God. They and we are chosen by God. It is something that runs throughout the Bible. We have been seeing it over the summer in our 'Who do you think you are' series, that Mary was chosen by God she was "highly favoured", just as Jacob was chosen and Abraham was chosen and David was chosen. Chosen not by merit but out of the love and grace of God. If you are here today as a follower of Jesus and someone were to ask you "why are you a Christian" what would you say? I'm a Christian because I heard the gospel and responded? Well that may be so but here Paul reminds these Christians that they are Christians because of the will of God even as we saw in v1 he was an apostle by the will of God – because God chose. Here is something to say God has done for us and to praise him for that he chose me and he chose you to be his child.

2. They have been adopted, v5,

"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ". These Christians had been adopted as God's children, as such they had begun a new relationship with their heavenly Father. Now I know that people struggle with the idea of predestination but we cannot escape from it either here or in v11, "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will". One of the most helpful ways I have heard of thinking about predestination is to think of conversion, coming to faith, as like walking through a gospel archway. On entering above our heads are the words "Come to me" and on the inside it says "chosen in him".

Predestination is a truth for our assurance. We all have times of doubt when we ask am I really a Christian, was it all my imagination, is faith a sham?

As long as it is all me there will be doubts. But here there is no room for doubts I was adopted by God, who has declared me his child with all the privileges that entails. God predestined me to be his child, he chose and called me and no one can take that away.

3. They have been redeemed, v7

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins”. How had these sinful people, Jew and gentile alike suddenly become as it says in v4 holy and blameless and therefore fitting children of God? The answer is through what God has done, through the death of Jesus. He died in their place to buy them back, redeem them, from slavery to sin into a relationship with God. On a Christmas card we once received it said this, “he (that is Jesus) came to pay a debt he didn’t owe because we owed a debt we couldn’t pay”. (redemption 4) What has God ever done for me, in the words of the song “come and see, come and see, come and see the King of Love, see the purple robe and crown of thorns he wears”. This is what God has done for those first Christians and for us.

4. They have been enlightened, v9&10,

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will.... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” Here is the vision of God’s new community, the Kingdom of God in which Jew and gentile are brought together under one head Jesus Christ. It is a vision of the future which happens in part now here on earth but fully in eternity. It is not just in the past that God had blessed these Christians nor just in the present but his blessing reaches out into the future.

While Terry Waite was being held hostage in Beirut at the end of the 1980’s he received a postcard the picture was of John Bunyan in prison. Terry Waite later said he thought to himself, “Bunyan, you’re a lucky fellow. You have a pen and paper; you have your own clothes and you can see outside your cell.” Such thoughts were not in Paul’s mind as he wrote to these Christians from prison. The scope of what he could see was not limited by bars or his condition. He looked back to before the creation of the world and forward into eternity and he saw God as sovereign over all of humanity and human history and he praised God for that and for the fact that he has enabled those who know Christ to see a glimpse of this and especially a glimpse of heaven. What has God done for us? He has helped us to see that there is purpose behind our world and our lives and that there is so much more than we see or know in this world.

5. They have been sealed, v13,

“Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit”. The Holy Spirit whom these Christians had seen come in a dramatic way in Acts 19 was the guarantee of their inheritance. He is the assurance that they belong to God and are in Christ. They were marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. In other words they were branded as slaves with a new owner. The Holy Spirit for them and for us is the assurance that we are under new ownership, that we are children of God. What has God ever done for us? He has given us his Holy Spirit.

As Paul wrote he wanted these Christians to be able to see what God had done for them and to join in the joy and praise that Paul experienced. I hope as we read these words over their shoulders and down the centuries we too can see what God has done and in that find great assurance and joy in Christ.

What God has done for me and for you if you are a follower of Christ? He has blessed us in so many ways spiritually.

He has chosen us to be his children and in so doing invested us with value – we are children of God.

He has adopted us into his family and given us the assurance that nothing can change that.

He has removed the penalty and guilt for all the things we have done wrong and in so doing given us peace with him.

He has helped us understand the goal of life in this world which sometimes seems crazy and meaningless. He has given us purpose and hope.

He has given us his Holy Spirit, his presence in us who assures us we are children of God and brings the many blessings of God into our lives.

What has God done he has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ and no burglar, no recession, no suffering or illness can take that away from us. No wonder Paul has got so much to praise God for – and so do we!