

EPHESIANS – A Brief Introduction

Our sermons in July and August are going to be based on the readings from the letter to the Ephesians. So this is by way of an Introduction. We may well hear those announced as “A reading from St Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians” – a mistaken announcement on three counts, probably. It almost certainly wasn’t by Paul, it isn’t really a letter, and it probably wasn’t written to the Ephesians. Apart from that, it is an accurate announcement!

Let’s start with the easy one – it probably wasn’t to the Ephesians. But it says it was, in Chapter 1 verse 1! Well, it depends on which translation you are using, because what we are quite clear about is that the oldest and most reliable copies of the letter do not say that – it was added later. But quite apart from the silence, we have to remember that, assuming Paul’s authorship for the moment, he spent a lot of time in Ephesus. So the lack of personal greetings (the one or two there are in this letter are suspiciously from the bits which appear to be copied from the letter the Colossians) is odd. Normally Paul has personal greetings to add, or comments to make. They don’t occur in a letter supposedly to people he knew extremely well. If we have to make a guess at where it was written for, which takes us into whether or not it was a letter, then we would have to say it was to churches in Asia Minor. In fact in the 3rd century Marcion thought this was the lost letter of Paul to the Laodiceans, which is mentioned in Colossians 4.6.

It isn’t a letter in the usual Pauline sense. It has no greetings. The letters we are certain are by Paul have the shape of theology followed ethics. In this letter we find theology and practice interwoven almost seamlessly throughout. It is probably a circular letter - an encyclical for many churches to digest and read. But there have been other suggestions which at least bear thinking about. It contains so many Pauline ideas, whilst not bearing the marks of his authorship, that some have thought it was a kind of covering letter that went with a collected edition of Paul’s real letters – possibly written by Onesimus, the ex-slave and later Bishop of Ephesus, who had been his amanuensis. Others have seen in it a written version of a baptism sermon. There is certainly liturgy in it. If you look at 1.3-14, which incidentally is all one long sentence in the Greek, it is in the form of a Jewish Blessing, or Berakah. In fact some scholars think that extends right through to the Chapter 3. So even if it is not a baptismal sermon or liturgy, it may well incorporate something of that kind in itself.

What about its not being by Paul? Erasmus was the first to doubt it, way back in 1519, and these days the majority of scholars lean in that direction. If we take just a few of the bits of evidence. There are some words that are used here in a quite different way from the way Paul uses them in other letters – the words *mysterion* (mystery) and *ekklesia* (church) for example. There are ninety words which occur here but nowhere else in Paul’s writing. And since the subject matter inevitably is not very different, it seems odd in the extreme that we have all those new usages.

But there is no proof, of course. But not only are there those linguistic clues, but we also have a kind of ‘second generation’ feel to much of it. Whereas Paul tends to be writing to people who see the church as a local phenomenon – the church at someone house, or in a particular city, and he writes to them in those terms, in Ephesians, the church is seen in a much grander and universal way – as an institution with a cosmic destiny, and with a far greater degree of structure in his organisation and clergy than we find in the rest of Paul. The Church community is settled enough to be able to look back to its founding fathers. It all points to a later date, when these things had come about. It assumes for example, that the Gentile Christians (for whom it appears to have been written) were totally accepted into the Christian community. We know from the other letters of Paul that that integration did not happen very quickly. Another argument for a later date is that there is no mention of the return of Jesus – which we know was very much at the front of people’s minds in earlier days.

But could we not argue that it is simply late Paul, when his thoughts had developed in this way? Well, that would be an argument if it were not for the letter to the Colossians, which people generally feel certain is by Paul. You might like, if you have time, to read Colossians again after you have read Ephesians. Some of it will seem incredibly familiar, because large chunks of it are regurgitated in Ephesians. Now if Paul was writing both at the same time, you would expect the same theology, and you don’t find it. And if he was writing it later, as his maturer reflections on the same topics, you wouldn’t expect so much overlap. So the likelihood is that it is *Pauline* rather than Paul, written in his name (you will recall that pseudipigrapha, as it is called, was perfectly acceptable and a proper way of showing respect). So it dates from not earlier than the 70s or 80s, and maybe a bit later.

So when, and who, and who for are unanswerable. But maybe we can discern a purpose or two. He seems to be anxious to assert Paul’s importance, maybe in the face of opposition. He is concerned above all with the unity of the church. That is centered in Christ, to whom he gives a high cosmic significance. He also seems to be asserting the authority of Church leaders. But in general he is asking people to think *one* and think *big*.

I wouldn’t want all this negativity about the name we give it to colour the way we read it. Professor Jimmy Dunn calls it ‘one of the most attractive documents in the New Testament’, and one which has ‘been uplifting and inspiring for countless individuals and communities’. No doubt that is why those who knew perfectly well it wasn’t a letter of Paul to the Ephesians were more than happy to include it in the Canon of the New Testament. It has great things to say about God, particularly in the first three chapters. It goes on to see how God has called us through Christ to a unity which is his will, and which we have to work out, both within the church community, and within individual families, both of which are a microcosm of the kingdom.

We have readings from Ephesians in the lectionary for several weeks in July and August. The sermons will be based on that reading. But you might like to read the whole of the Chapter each week, and consider some of the questions attached.

Week 1 Ephesians Chapter 1

Lectionary Reading: July 14th Ephesians 1.3-14

1. Do you think of yourself as one of the ‘saints who are in..’ Ludlow? (v.1)
2. How do you feel you have been ‘blessed’ by God? (v.3)
3. In what ways could people say of us as a church that they have heard of our faith and our ‘love towards all the saints’? (v.15)
4. We sometimes say in the Eucharist ‘We are the Body of Christ’ (v.22-23). What does that mean for you?

Week 2 Ephesians Chapter 2

Lectionary Reading: July 21st Ephesians 2.11-22

1. What do you make of the idea of ‘the ruler of the power of the air’ (v.2)? Is having a concept of an external power of evil still appropriate in today’s world?
2. ‘Grace’ is a major New Testament word (v.5-9). Old preachers used to define it as ‘God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.’ That may be questionable. But how do you define it?
3. Does the language of reconciling Jew and Gentile (v.12-15) have anything to offer in our present world divisions?
4. Michel Quoist wrote a prayer about us being bricks in the right place in God’s building (v.21-22). What is your place in the structure?

Week 3 Ephesians Chapter 3

Lectionary Reading: July 28th Ephesians 3.14-21

1. The writer speaks of having a ‘revelation’ to share. (v.3-4). Have you ever felt a sense of having a revelation about God?
2. He talks of a mystery having been made clear (v.9-10). What do you think he meant by that, and what are the mysteries we still wrestle with?
3. He writes about his imprisonment (v.1) and his suffering (v.13). Some fellow-Christians are imprisoned and suffering today. How do we relate to them? What might they have to teach us?
4. How have you experienced being ‘strengthened in your inner being’ (v.16)?

Week 4 Ephesians Chapter 4. 1-24

Lectionary Reading: August 4th Ephesians 4.1-16

1. What are the things which make it hard for you to ‘maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’? (v.3)
2. What gifts has God given you as your contribution to the building up of the body of Christ (v.11-12)?
3. What makes you feel ‘tossed to and fro’ (v.14) in your faith?
4. Do you think of non-believers as being ‘in the dark’ (v.18). Or is God at work in everyone?

Week 5 Ephesians Chapter 4.25 – 5.14

Lectionary Reading: August 11th Ephesians 4.25- 5.2

1. How do you deal with the anger you sometimes feel? (v.26)
2. Do you find it easier to have ‘bitterness, wrath, and anger’ (v.31) or to be ‘tender-hearted, kind and forgiving’ (v.32)?
3. What do you understand by ‘the wrath of God’ (v.6) How does that square with the idea of a God of love?
4. How can we try to find out what is ‘pleasing to the Lord? (v.10)

Week 6 Ephesians Chapter 5.15 -33

Lectionary Reading: August 18th Ephesians 5.15-20

1. How can we ‘make the most of the time’ (v.15)?
2. How do we understand the words about marital relationships (v.22-29) in the light of today’s different concept of marriage?
3. How do you understand the image of Christ as Bridegroom and the Church as Bride (v.32)?
4. Is there any difference between loving and respecting (v.33)?

Week 7 Ephesians Chapter 6

Lectionary Reading: August 25th Ephesians 6.10-20

1. How do parents provoke their children to anger (v.4)? Have you done that?
2. We now see slavery as completely wrong. So how can we apply the words addressed here to slaves and masters (v.5-9)
3. What are the forces of evil we contend with today (v.12)?
4. Which parts of the armour of God (v.13-17) are most helpful to you?

I hope these notes and questions will help us all to make the most of these weeks spent with the letter to the Ephesians.

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