

What a list!

Ephesians 1.3-14

Some quotes from comedy shows make it into general use, without people necessarily knowing where they came from. Think of ‘Stupid Boy’ in Dad’s Army or ‘I know nozzing’ in Fawlty Towers. One such is the sequence in Monty Python’s ‘Life of Brian’ – the question ‘what have the Romans ever done for us?’ Let me give you the gist of it as a reminder:

“The aqueduct.

Yeah, yeah. They did give us that..

And the sanitation.

And the roads.

Well, yeah. But apart from the sanitation, the aqueduct, and the roads.....

Irrigation.

Medicine.

Education.

Yeah, yeah. All right. Fair enough.

And the wine.

Public baths.

All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

Brought peace.”

That came to my mind as I looked at today’s reading from the first Chapter of Ephesians. Would you believe that, although as you have it in today’s service leaflet, there are seven sentences, originally it was just one – all 210 words in the Greek! This is someone getting carried away with a list, not of what the Romans have done for us, but what God has done for us. The format is a traditional Jewish one – a Berekah, an outburst of praise which we find in the Psalms, and elsewhere in the New Testament. Some scholars have thought this might be part of what was said at a baptism, reminding the candidates what God had done for them. Our first hymn took exactly that form – ‘To God be the glory, great things he hath done’.

Now this presents a problem for a preacher. Let me just list what it says God has done for us in Christ:

He chose us

He destined us

He bestowed grace

He redeemed us

He forgave us

He has revealed the mystery of his will

He has given us an inheritance

He has marked us with the seal of the Holy Spirit.

So if I just look at those in some more detail, say 2-3 minutes on each, that would mean at least a twenty-five minute sermon. Is that OK? No, of course it isn't. So I have got to pick out just some of that list, and then talk about why the writer said it, and what it implies for us. If I haven't picked the ones you would have liked me to talk about, my apologies. Our Offertory hymn picks up some of those ideas,

'He chose us before the foundation of the world.' This is a difficult idea in some ways. It could imply that God chooses some, and not others. And indeed there have been Christians thinkers who have talked in those terms. But what kind of God does that imply – someone who arbitrarily says 'yes' to some and 'no' to others. That is not the God whom Jesus revealed. What is much more helpful is to think in terms of why God has chosen, and who he has chosen. The Old Testament is happy to talk of the Jews as God's chosen people. He chose them to reveal things about himself, not just for their benefit, but for the benefit of everyone. And now in Christian terms, God has chosen us to be the means whereby what he has done in Christ is known to everyone who will listen. We are chosen not for our own benefit, but to benefit others. As Archbishop William Temple reputedly said – 'the church exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.' And we are chosen not because we deserve to be (like people being chosen for a sports team) but simply because God loves us. As the great Baptist preacher Spurgeon once said – 'it is a good thing God chosen me before I was born, because he certainly wouldn't have chosen me afterwards!'

Let's take another from that list – 'he has made known to us the mystery of his will'. This really extends a little what I said just now about being chosen. In Christ we see in a way which before him was impossible to see, what God is like. You can trace a development of understanding about God through the story of the Jewish revelation. For example you can see in what has been written in the Old Testament that they progressed from believing there were many Gods, to believing their God was top God. And from there to believing there was only one God. It is progressive revelation. Then in the coming of Jesus there is a step change in that revelation. Now people could grasp more fully what God was like. As Bishop David Jenkins used to say 'God is, he is as he is in Jesus, Therefore I have hope,' And we should not see that as the end of the story. The passage we have been looking at talks about the gift of the Holy Spirit as the 'pledge of our inheritance.' As one commentator put it – that was the first instalment of all that God wants us to know. We can see through Christian history how by the gift of the Holy Spirit our understanding of the nature of God has continued to develop. Think for example of the fact that today we wrestle with how to cope with our past involvement with slavery. Christians took centuries to see that slavery was not consistent with our understanding of God. The growing realisation that men and women have been treated in unequal ways is another example. Who know what new revelations of the mystery of God are still to come. It could be that

in 200-300 years people will look back at the way we think, and say ‘How could Christians think like that?’ We continue to perceive the mystery of God as time rolls on.

It seems likely that the message of this epistle was intended to speak to a situation in which there was a sense of conflict – there were people who were unsure whether the Christian message was sufficient to answer the questions they were facing. There were in both Jewish and Gentile worlds ideas about cosmic battles between good and evil, and there were philosophies and religious ideas which offered varying answers to those questions. Here this epistle gives a strong and confident assertion that it is in Christ that those answers are to be found. Did you note that in our reading we heard that time and again? Who has blessed us *in Christ*, chose us *in Christ*, destined us *through Christ*, the pleasure he set forth *in Christ*, *in Christ* we have obtained an inheritance, *in Christ* we were marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit.’. He asserts without any doubt that Christ is above all the worldly and supernatural powers now and in the future.

It is an amazing single sentence that we have begun to unpack. Can I encourage you to do some more of that unpacking for yourself, and to join in that outburst of praise...’Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ who has done all this for you and for me. Indeed we could say that, like the last of the things listed that the Romans did for us, Christ has brought us peace. And that is exactly what you will find said in the next chapter of Ephesians when you come to look at it. Indeed it doesn’t just say ‘Christ brought us peace’: it says ‘Christ *is* our peace.’