

## Praying for what?

## Ephesians 3.14-21

Here in the second part of Chapter 3 the writer turns to prayer. Some scholars think that verses 1-12 of Chapter 3 are an interpolation. You recall that we have had a list of all the things God has done for us – that started right at the beginning of Chapter 1. So when in verse 13 he writes ‘I pray *therefore...*’ it seems as if there has a turning from the list of God's goodness to what follows from it – what he prays he wants his readers to be and do. If you have a Bible open to look at this letter, just try reading directly from the end of Chapter 2 to verse 14 of Chapter 3 – it follows quite naturally.

So what does he pray for? First of all it is a prayer for strength, for power – ‘May you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.’ It is probable that his readers were facing persecution. They were certainly facing opposition from people with a different spiritual outlook. There are plenty of our fellow-Christians across the world who similarly need to have that inner strength in the situations they face. We need to be constantly reminded that freedom to follow Christ openly is a privilege we have, but that not every Christian shares. And how is that strength and power to come? He says it is through the presence of the Holy Spirit in them. Think of it as a kind of divine reinforcement. Sometimes on the Repair Shop you see those wonderful craftsmen saying that in order for something to have a future, they need to put a new lining underneath the frayed leather or fabric. That isn't a bad image to have. We have little strength on our own, but with God's Holy Spirit within, then we are capable of much more than we at first imagine. He refers to it as Christ ‘dwelling’ in our hearts by faith. It is interesting that the word he uses for ‘dwelling’ is one meaning a permanent residence, not a temporary one. In a verse of ‘Abide with me’ that we don't usually sing these days Henry Lyte wrote:

Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word,  
But as thou dwellest with thy disciples Lord,  
Familiar, condescending, patient, free,  
Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.

So the prayer is not that God can come and give us a hand when we happen to need him – but that he is always there to strengthen and enable us. He underlines this by the imagery of a root – we are rooted and grounded in love – God's love. It is back to that sense of Christ as the foundation stone we thought about last week.

And then the prayer is for comprehension – that they may know ‘what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to now the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.’ That is a bit of a contradiction, isn't it - prayer that we may know what we cannot know. But that makes sense. We

are to love God with ‘all our heart and soul and *mind*.’ But however deeply we may delve into the mystery of God, we never get it all. I have always said that if anyone tells me that they have no doubts, I will be glad to visit them in the psychiatric ward. If we think we have God sewn up, then by definition we must be wrong. But that isn’t to say we shouldn’t try. We may have varying intellectual capacity, but we can all use whatever gifts of that kind we have been given to their fullest extent. We have made terrible mistakes in the church sometimes, by assuming that what we might label ‘book knowledge’ is what matters. Some of the wisest Christians I have known are people who would never pass a GCSE in RE. Because the real wisdom is a gift from God, not simply the result of intellectual endeavour. Nonetheless, we need to learn what it is that God wants to teach us. The sad thing is that probably more football fans know more about their game than do Christians about their faith. That weakness I blame not so much on them, as on the church. If we go back centuries, the church patronisingly said that ordinary Christians couldn’t cope with theology. So the Bible needn’t be translated into people’s own language because it would be beyond them – it had to be mediated through the so-called wisdom of the religious experts of the church. And right down to our own time we had the example of Bishop David Jenkins, who was vilified for saying publicly things that had been said for generations in theological colleges. People said it was going to undermine people’s simple faith. How patronising can you be? Simple faith is fine. Simplistic faith is not so fine. The Christians who read this letter were surrounded by people involved in Gnostic sects – and people were admitted to various gradations of belonging by having secrets revealed to them. Here we are told there are no secrets kept for the enlightened few – the wisdom of God is open to us all. But the writer does here suggest that it is in the company of our fellow-Christians that we begin to get that comprehension of what the mystery of God is. We are not on an individual journey, but a shared pilgrimage, during which we can learn from each other. We are to ‘comprehend *with all the saints*’ the fullness of God. John Wesley once said that God knows nothing of solitary religion. But we will never, in this life, reach the end of that revelation of how great God is. But as time goes by, if this prayer is answered, we will understand more and more – not simply in our brains, but as he says ‘in our hearts’.

The Epistle is going on to talk of various moral and ethical issues. But this part of it ends with an ascription of glory to God. Think of a broad brush summary of what we have heard so far. ‘God has done all this, so this is what we should pray for, and in the end of the day, it all is down to God.’ We began Chapter 1 with ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ and we end with saying ‘to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen’ It is not only a reminder that what God has done, but what he continues to do in the life of the Christian community. That can be beyond our wildest dreams. And not only is God at work in and through us today, but will be to the end of time and beyond.