18 July 2021 St. Clement’s, N. Van Proper 16.B

*Disclaimer: Holy Scripture as light illuminating ahead of us –My thinking here goes beyond an “exact reading” of text.*

I was fortunate in that, when I first began reading the Bible, I had nothing already formulated about Paul of Tarsus. Feminist studies were only beginning, and I was naive to the nuances of patriarchy and male-centred language. So I had fresh eyes when I read the letters of Paul –” to what J. B. Phillips, Biblical scholar and translator in the middle of the last century, called “Letters to Young Churches”.

Of the thirteen letters that bear Paul’s name, seven are recognized as from the Apostle, while the other six were likely composed by his disciples, sometimes with portions of Paul’s writings we do not have. Ephesians falls in this second group.

It starts off with a salutation and then proceeds to bless Gd. In the blessing and what follows we will hear clues as to what the substance of the letter will address. This week we hear further emphasis by the writer on the message of last week: the adoption of the Gentiles into the grace of Gd, or the ‘Common-wealth of Israel,’ as the reading puts it. The image the writer uses is of a building, the church as a house where Gd lives, a house for which both the apostles of the early church and the prophets of Israel are the foundation, with Christ as the balancing point, the cornerstone.

I want to take us back to last week’s reading, where this message starts, in the opening benediction.

“Blessed be the Gd and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places

Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world

To be holy and blameless before him in love.

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ,

According to the good pleasure of his will,

To the praise of his glorious grace that he has freely bestowed upon us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,

According to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us.

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will,

According to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,

As a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him,

things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,

Having been destined according to the purpose of him

who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,

So that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ,

Might live to the praise of his glory.

Isn’t it majestic? It is liturgical, creed-like in its proclamation. There is a cosmic scope to it, as it is “Gd’s pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” What once was the “very good” creation of Gd will again be the “very good” creation of Gd, recovered from the brokenness in which it has suffered from before history was written.

Here we have it: in Christ those who are not Jewish are incorporated into Gd’s holy people, something Gd had always intended to do. What was separated – the outcome of the story of the Tower of Babel – are now brought together again – reconciled. There is no separation between those whom Gd loves.

This is a theme we run into over and over in Paul’s writings, and the writer of Ephesians certainly got the picture, a prime directive that was – in my mind – ‘misappropriated’ within centuries.

I wonder if it was inevitable that the idea of the cosmic application of the Gospel would become the basis of Christian Empire? The Jews demanded a Kingdom and got Saul and David, Solomon and then a divided kingdom that was conquered and never rose again. Christianity went from being deemed anti-social and dangerous, to become one of many approved religions in the Roman Empire and then the only authorized religion. Faith in a loving and merciful Gd got tangled up in matters of state and citizenship, of power and politics.

But Gd does not see according to our lines and boundaries. Gd sees us through Gd’s dream made real in Creation. In today’s terms we might talk about a web of life, a cosmic web formed out of the dust of the first eruption that spawned the universe when Gd spoke that first word, “Let there be light.”

Which puts to the church the challenge and crisis that has always been the source of division among Gd’s own beloved, the question of who Gd includes in Gd’s commonwealth of life.

The Scripture is not exempt from this challenge: both Matthew and John’s Gospel show us that the early church believed that only by being baptised and becoming a member of the Church could bring this unity to people who had previously been “outside”. Grace was still a limited commodity. For generations the missionary efforts of the churches have been based on this principle – you must become a Christian to receive the benefits of Gd’s grace. Over and over through the history of the Church there have even been fights over what people in the Church were really Christian, what did “we” need to do to be certain “we” were in the right batch?

As the world got smaller in the past century, and some people crossed boundaries to encounter and appreciate people of other faiths, many of these assumptions have been questioned. How often have you heard, or said, “I know so-and-so is not a Christian, but they live a more Christian life than people I know in the church!” or something like that?

Bishop Gordon Light wrote a song, ‘My love likes to colour outside the lines.’ It starts with a description of his beloved refusing to colour inside the lines. The image then grows to describe Gd who is always colouring outside the lines of our expectations.

The Cosmic Christ we encounter in Ephesians, and again in Colossians, is not restrained or restricted by our limitations and divisions, although our perceptions and proclamation may make it appear so. We receive Gd’s truth to the best of our abilities in our own times. But we do not have to remain limited by the limitations of former generations. This is exactly what the work of the Holy Spirit is given to us for – to understand the Gospel in new terms that fit our own generation.

I believe this is true and necessary. I believe it is more necessary today than yesterday, than last year, than a decade ago. I thought that perhaps the global challenge of the pandemic might help us to get past the barriers we take for granted in our world. Instead, new barriers have been erected in some places, and in others old barriers have held firm or been rebuilt.

How do we live as if all of us are one people, one household of Gd when the gap between rich and poor gets bigger? When the debates between one expression of faithfulness and another become condemning? When we encounter people who do not feel the same and want the world to be fashioned according to their creed?

As ever, it comes down to how we live “Love the Lord your Gd, and your neighbour as yourself”: from ourself, to our family – who are not always easy to love -- to our communities and beyond. To live love at the local level while never losing sight of the bigger picture,

With all wisdom and insight The Holy One has made known to us the mystery of Gd’s will,

According to Gd’s good pleasure set forth in Christ,

As a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him,

things in heaven and things on earth.”

Let us pray.

Holy Gd, Creator of all that is and whatever shall be,

Help us to risk stretching beyond our comfort zones to welcome without judgment those who are different from us. Open our eyes to see in them ourselves, and to hear in their words testimony to your presence in all times and all places. Open our hearts to the fullness of the reconciliation glimpsed in the Scriptures; we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.