

Sermon – 24/08/2008 am

Christ's Gift

Study Text: Ephesians 4:7-10

The church featured prominently in the first three chapters of this letter to the saints or believers at Ephesus. The church is called the body of Christ. God made Jesus head over the church (1:22). The church demonstrates to all humanity, to the angels and heavenly powers, the wisdom of God (3:10). *To God be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever Amen* (3:21).

What is the church? It is the assembly of God's people. The word *ecclesia* means the 'called out ones'. The church is people, the elect of God called together by God under the headship of Christ. The church is not an institution but an organism. The church is precious and holy in God's sight. It is the bride of Christ. So it is that the second half of this letter, the half about practical living, continues to focus on the church.

We find here teaching about how we are to live as individuals before God but also about how we are to live together before God. To walk worthy means bearing with one another in love. Walking in love we strive to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Love, peace and patience should mark the life of every follower of Christ, every member of the body of Christ.

Individual Gifts

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift (4:7). In this section Paul turns from the oneness/unity which must be seen in the church to the variety/diversity of gifts given by Christ to each one in the church. There are certain characteristics which mark every believer. The fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – should be seen in everyone who has the Spirit of God. But there are also gifts of the Spirit, different gifts given to each individual for use in the church.

Did you watch any of the opening ceremony of the Olympics? It is amazing how many people they can put together, all dressed the same, all marching the same and all carrying and playing the same drums. It was quite a spectacle – but after a while you start to look for some individual performances.

We are all born different. A society of clones would be rather boring. As believers we are all born again in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are all born of the Spirit, the one Holy Spirit. We have all been given a new heart, a heart that is filled with the fullness of the love of God in Christ Jesus. We gather here today to worship the Lord for whom he is and all that he has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We praise and worship him as one people, one family.

In some religions group worship is not common. With millions of different gods Hindus usually worship individually. Others go off to their temples to spin the prayer wheel and worship individually. Some Christians also focus of individual worship. They worship how they like and when it is convenient for them. Why gather with a bunch of hypocrites they say.

Unity in diversity is the picture of the church shown to us in this passage. The church is more like a play or musical than band of marching drummers. In a play each person has their

special part to play. At high school I was given a part in the musical ‘Oklahoma’. I had to carry a saddle as well as join in the chorus. It was only a minor role but a role essential to the whole performance.

In the church each member has a part to play – an essential part. *We being many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another* (Romans 12:5). The body metaphor is what we find in this passage and other passages in the Bible to describe the church. The building metaphor is there also but bricks can all be the same. In the body there is great diversity in the parts and yet all parts are connected to the head and are interdependent. Moreover all parts are essential to the proper operation of the body.

In the church, the assembly of God’s people, there are many tasks or functions to be undertaken. No one person is given the gift to carry out all these tasks but Christ gives certain gifts to certain individuals for the purpose of all working together to build up the body of Christ.

Before going on to outline the spiritual gifts and the use of them in the church Paul takes a moment to explain how we come to have these gifts. As he writes about the church and its operation his eyes remain firmly on the Lord Jesus Christ, on his grace and his gifts.

Ascended

Always concerned to ground practical teaching in doctrine, the apostle finds a passage in the book of Psalms which teaches about Christ’s gifts. Paul knew the Psalms very well and explains much of his gospel from the Psalms (e.g. Romans 15). Psalm 68 is about the great king and his victory over his enemies. In those days when kings came home victorious they would lead a train of captives and carry a lot of plunder. The king would give this to his soldiers and his people. God led his people out of Egypt in victory over Pharaoh and his army.

Paul understood Christ’s victory over Satan and his followers to be prefigured in this Psalm. In Colossians 2:15 he writes *having disarmed the principalities and powers he made a public spectacle of them triumphing over them in it* – that is the cross. The victory of the cross was confirmed in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Satan thought the cross was his victory but in the wisdom of God it was actually Christ’s victory. Jesus took the punishment for our sin. He released us from the bondage of sin, bondage that began in the Garden of Eden.

This victory of Christ is fundamental to our freedom and to the exercise of the gifts given us by Christ. Are you confident in this victory of Christ over Satan or are you still being seduced by Satan from time to time? Satan offers us many pleasures and treasures in this life. Many listen to him and walk in his ways.

‘People think that a life of sin is a life of freedom but it is the greatest slavery of all. Think of the masses of people in the world today who are slaves to drink and to drugs, to sex, to fame and a thousand others things. They talk about their marvellous liberty and life but they are poor benighted slaves, as they soon discover when they try to set themselves free’ – Martin Lloyd-Jones.

Jesus sets us free from slavery to Satan, and bondage to the law. He told the Jews walking proudly in the law that they were slaves to sin and of their father the devil. Jesus is risen. Jesus has ascended into heaven. He has ascended above the heavens to the highest place that he might fill all in all. Paul cannot get away from the infinite power and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ that pervades all creation.

You may have noticed that Paul does not quote Psalm 68 exactly. The Psalm has *he received gifts from men* whereas Paul writes *he gave gifts to men*. Was Paul a bit confused or careless? Certainly not! Was he deliberately changing Scripture? Not really. Paul was explaining how this verse is Messianic, how it actually refers to Christ. He knew how Jesus said the Scriptures testify of me (John 5:39).

Psalm 68 goes on to tell that *the king brings presents to you* (Psalm 68:29). Paul understood the content and the context of this Psalm and as an inspired writer himself expressed its truth in this reference. The king having received gifts in victory gave them to his people. Jesus told his disciples that when he ascended to his Father he would send the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). He did this at Pentecost. *Being exalted to the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he (Jesus) poured out this which you now see and hear* (Acts 2:33). Both receiving and giving are here spoken of in this verse.

Descended

The next logical thought as Paul considers this Psalm, and the gifts given by Christ, is that if Christ ascended it means he first descended. He *descended into the lower parts of the earth* (4:9). Jesus left the glory of heaven to come into this fallen world. The wonder of the incarnation and the humiliation of Christ overtake Paul as he meditates on this Scripture.

There is some debate about this reference to *the lower parts of the earth*. Some think it refers to the place where those who died before the coming of Christ are held captive. The Roman Church teaches this interpretation under the doctrine of 'limbus patrum'. But the simple meaning is that Christ came to this earth in which we live, a very low and humiliating place for the sinless and glorious Son of God.

Jesus told his disciples many times that he was sent into this world by his Father, and that after doing the work he was sent to do he would return to his Father (John 17). The humiliation and exaltation of Jesus are expressed in the great passage in Philippians chapter 2 – sometimes referred to as the parabola passage. Being humbled in this world, being found as a man, Jesus went to the cross to die in order to deliver you from your sin. Then God exalted him to the highest place. He returned to his heavenly glory.

The Psalm Paul was reading spoke of the Lord ascending on high. This reminded him that Jesus first came down to this earth and lived among us. *The word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father* (John 1:14). Paul saw that glory – what about you? Do you give thanks and worship the Lord for coming to down to this world and taking your sin in his body to the cross?

As we look to Jesus in his risen glory and go on to consider the gifts that he has given to us in the Holy Spirit let us not forget how he left the glory of heaven to suffer and die in this wicked world. He did this because of his great love, because of his mercy towards us who were slaves to sin and to death.

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