

Sermon – 22/06/2008 am

Unsearchable Riches of Christ

Study Text: Ephesians 3:8-11

When the explorers of this land crossed the mountains they found rivers that flowed to the west. They thought there must be an inland lake somewhere. They followed these rivers to see where they went. Eventually they reached this lake and it was indeed a vast lake. They had come to the great southern ocean! This sea stretched as far as they could see and way beyond. Who would measure the size of this ocean? Who would plumb its vast depths?

The explorers did not have the benefit of ‘Google Earth’. They could not open their laptop and get satellite images of this vast ocean they had come to. They could not see the big picture that we can today. But still we know little of what lies beneath the ocean surface.

The apostle Paul preached the unsearchable riches of Christ. He preached the mystery of Christ and the wonder of God’s grace. God’s grace is like a vast ocean which he had only begun to explore. This grace was revealed in Jesus Christ. It was made known to the apostle Paul as never before, yet he was still searching the depths of this grace and seeking to make known the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (3:19).

Who am I?

Paul became a minister or servant of Christ by the power of God. He did nothing to deserve such as high calling- and it is indeed a high calling to be a servant of King Jesus. Paul had done nothing to recommend him for the job. No one gave him a reference. It was the gift of God. It was all of God’s grace. Paul was recalling his Damascus road experience. He was the most unlikely candidate for this task. He was persecuting followers of Christ when he was called to preach Christ to the Gentiles.

I am *less than the least of all the saints* (3:8). Of course there can be nothing less than the least, but Paul writes this to emphasise his utter unworthiness for the task Jesus gave him. No man- certainly no man who was now a believer- had been so wicked, so opposed to Christ, as Paul in his former life. He was *a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man...* but *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom, I am chief* (I Timothy 1:13, 15). God’s grace abounded towards Paul. God touched his evil heart and made him a new man. Paul was a walking testimony to the power of God’s grace.

Paul knew the grace of God not only in his salvation but also in his ongoing life and ministry. He was given grace to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. Ministry of the word is at low ebb in our society. The other day a man was told that I was a Presbyterian minister. He had no idea what I did. Ministers are there to perform marriages, baptisms and funerals are what many think.

Paul gives a very different view of Christian ministry. He was not called to perform religious rituals but to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was called to make known the mystery that was made known to him. Of course the world did not want to hear this message in his day any more than it does today.

Ministers are not called to be managers or administrators of institutions. They are called to be administrators of the mystery of Christ. Ministers are not called to be commentators on the kingdoms of this world but to proclaim the kingdom of God. Ministers are not even called to preach ethics and religion. They are called to preach Christ and Christ alone. *I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified* Paul told the Corinthians (I Corinthians 2:2).

To the extent that ministers have departed from this high calling, the church has declined. Pray that the Lord will raise up men who fear the Lord and not man, who will be faithful in preaching the kingdom of God and not the kingdom of men, men who recognise their unworthiness to be ministers of King Jesus just like Paul.

What I Preach

The unsearchable riches of Christ (3:8). What are we to understand by this term? We can say it and rejoice in it but what does it mean? Paul was fond of the word 'riches' – see 2:4, 3:16 – but not for the same reason as most people. Paul did not think of riches in material terms, but in spiritual terms. Riches may refer to an abundance of things or to having something precious. In the grace of Jesus Christ, Paul had the most precious 'thing' in all the earth – and heaven. He would never come to know the vastness of this treasure in this life.

Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as like a treasure hidden in a field. The man who found this treasure sold all he had to buy the field so the treasure would be his. The wonderful thing about this treasure, if we can extrapolate on this parable, is that we keep on finding more and more. The more we dig the more we find, like a never-ending seam of gold.

The thing about finding treasure of course is knowing where to dig and having the strength to dig. The gospel, along with the Holy Spirit, is our map or guide. The Holy Spirit is our strength. 'Unsearchable' literally means 'without human footprint'. We cannot discover these riches in our own strength. *How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out* wrote Paul in Romans 11:33 after declaring *Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!* God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than ours.

The wonder of it all as far as Paul was concerned was that God had made known to him the mystery, the mystery of Christ. God's great and eternal plan of salvation in Jesus Christ is beyond all human and even angelic imagination. God created all things. He made man and woman and fellowshiped with them. But they disobeyed God thereby bringing his wrath upon them. How could redemption be accomplished? How could God bring rebellious man, man who is now his enemy, back into fellowship with himself? At God's spoken word all things were created. God is all powerful; could he not simply say 'you are redeemed'? No, because he is also holy and just. His wrath must be propitiated.

How God would deal with this 'problem' was not known to men in past ages. The Gentiles went on in the darkness of the devil, while the Jews went on with their sacrifices in the hope that their sins would be atoned for. It was only in Jesus Christ that God's great plan was revealed. It was not a new plan – it was not plan B as it were -but it was his plan from the beginning. It was his *eternal purpose* (3:11)

The second Adam, the perfect man, the man without sin, would bear the wrath of God upon sin – upon the sin of the world. God would be just and the justifier. In his love he would give his only begotten Son as the perfect sacrifice for sin. Mercy and truth have met together;

righteousness and peace have kissed (Psalm 85:10). *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1).

Paul preached this glorious gospel among the Gentiles. It was great news to them. It is great news today to those who are outside of Christ. Never has such good news been heard in the history of the human race and never will such good news cease to be preached while the earth remains.

Why I Preach

Paul preached to the glory of God – *to the praise of the glory of his grace* he wrote in his opening doxology (1:6). He was called by God through Jesus Christ and he was empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. Preaching was not something Paul chose to do. It is not something any man chooses to do. Paul did not preach his own message, a way of salvation he made up or discovered himself. He preached what God had revealed to him.

Paul did not measure the success of his preaching by the numbers listening or the numbers being baptised. We do not know the size of the church at Ephesus or in other places. At Colossae the church met in the home of Philemon (Philemon vs. 3). Paul seemed to measure his ministry by his suffering. Ultimately he was concerned to be faithful to the Lord who called him.

We see another dimension of Paul's purpose in preaching in this passage. *To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places* (3:10). Paul saw this glorious gospel from a heavenly perspective. He took a 'Google Earth' view if you like to see the big picture of the cosmic Christ. He alluded to this previously in 1:10 and 2:6, 7. Here he explicitly refers to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. These must be angels, good and evil. Elsewhere the term refers to wicked spiritual rulers and powers (6:12).

The cross and the resurrection show forth the manifold wisdom of God. God's own Son bore the wrath of God that we might live and not die. But there is more to the many-sided wisdom of God. At the cross he defeated the devil. Satan was cast out. And still more – God's wisdom is portrayed before all heaven and earth in the church, the church in which both Jew and Gentile come together to worship God.

Years ago Rolf Harris used to paint before a live audience. With a builders paintbrush he would splash colour on the canvas. Each colour was bright and beautiful and the strokes and dabs had their own beauty. But in the end the camera would zoom out to reveal a beautiful image.

In the church God has displayed his manifold wisdom not only to men but to the whole of creation. Sin brought division in the world. Satan rejoiced in this hostility and promoted it. No one, not even the angels, ever thought that Jew and Gentile would ever worship together. But by the blood of Jesus Christ they now do. In God's great masterpiece, which is the church, Jew and Gentile stand together praising their creator and redeemer. They do so for the universe to see, and will do so into eternity. And you are part of God's cosmic masterpiece if you are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ.

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