

Ephesians 3

For two thousand years Christians have been persecuted

- The early Christians were persecuted by the Romans
- Jesus' crucifixion was authorised by Roman authorities
- And carried out by Roman soldiers
- Christians were persecuted under the Emperor Nero, blaming them for a fire in Rome
- Christians were tortured, crucified, fed to the lions, burned
- And this persecution continued for the remaining centuries of Rome's Empire
- Christians were persecuted by Persians, Goths and Vandals
- Biblical Christians have been persecuted by church hierarchies
- The Waldenses were brutally persecuted by the Roman Catholics
- On St Bartholomew's day 1572, the French king ordered the murder of Protestants
- In the last century 1.5m. Armenian and Syriac Christians died in the Ottoman Empire (the Armenian and Assyrian Genocide)
- Christians were discriminated against and persecuted in the Soviet Union
- The same was true of many countries in the Eastern Bloc, especially Albania
- There is a long history of persecution of Christians in China and Japan
- Christians are persecuted in many Islamic states (e.g. Sudan, Pakistan, Indonesia)

The New Testament records many incidents of persecution

- The Apostle James was beheaded in prison
- Christian tradition also reports that Peter was crucified upside down (judging himself unworthy to be crucified in the same way as his Lord)
- And although it says nothing of the death of the Apostle Paul
- Christian tradition reports that he was executed in Rome by being beheaded

In Ephesians 3 we find Paul in prison and yet his outlook (imitated by many since)

- Is not one of gloom and despondency
- The twin claims that no time has ever been harder to be a Christian than now
- And that no place has ever been harder to be a Christian than here
- The familiar and all too common characteristics of Western Christianity
- Would be unrecognisable to Paul – despite being imprisoned
- His outlook was characterised by faith and hope because:

I HE BELIEVES IN GOD'S POWER

Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles
(Ephesians 1:1)

It would have been easy for Paul to feel a victim of either Jewish or Roman persecution

- Yet he refuses to regard himself as a prisoner of the Jewish religious leaders
- Or even of the Roman emperor Nero
- He is 'the prisoner of Christ Jesus'
- And in Chapter 3 of this letter to the Ephesians
- He continues the prayer that he began in Chapter 1 and has not really stopped
- He is a servant of Christ and if he is in prison he must only be there to serve Christ
- His inner faith is unshaken by outward circumstances

This is so different from the present way of understanding our circumstances

- That it is worthy of some further reflection
- Paul describes himself as ‘the prisoner of Christ’ and as ‘servant of the gospel’ (v.7)
- In other places he describes himself as a ‘slave of Christ’ (Romans 1:1)
- But these are not necessarily the titles Christians apply to themselves today

It is very far away from our thinking – especially the thinking of the ‘prosperity gospel’

- That imported American heresy that suggests that God always blesses faithfulness
- With material rewards and that if you are not materially rewarded something is wrong
- Rather than moaning about what he might be missing Paul rejoices in suffering
- Paul rejoices in suffering because it is a means of identifying with Christ’s death
- And Paul is clear that if he identifies with his death
- He can also identify with his resurrection
- Paul knows that he is imprisoned for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles
- And therefore he sees this persecution as a direct result of the grace of God
- Paul’s focus is on the Lordship of Jesus Christ rather than adverse circumstances

It seems to me that there is a lot for us to learn here

- This is not one of those sermons that says Paul had it bad
- We do not have it so bad – therefore, buck up!
- Many of us are all too familiar with the problems we face in the 21st century
- The institutional decline of organised religion is well-documented
- In our local situation it is easy to concentrate on problems of finance
- Of shortage of ministry, and the abundance of ageing and often decaying buildings
- Of apathy and indifference
- In our personal lives few of us are victims of violent persecution
- But that is not to say that contemporary Christians have it all easy
- Older Christians, people who are now retired, will have and still have challenges
- But younger Christians have to face new challenges in a rapidly changing world
- And can find themselves, lonely, marginalised, misunderstood and discouraged
- The variety of social and personal contexts is endless but the moral is the same
- In his circumstances Paul focused on Jesus Christ – he believes in God’s power

Now of course it is all very well and good to say that we believe in God’s power

- In theory, we probably all believe in God’s power – but practice is different
- It is matter not only of believing it in theory but applying it in practice
- It is no good simply saying that we believe in the power of God
- If we do not live trusting in the power of God
- The power of God does not mean that everything is going to be comfortable
- What it does mean is that whatever happens God is in ultimate control
- He tells the Ephesians not to be discouraged (v. 13)
- And this is how Paul moves on (v. 14) for he kneels before the Father in prayer
- Interestingly enough, his prayer is not for himself but for them
- He does not come to God with a shopping list of wants for himself
- But he comes asking that they may be strengthened with power (v. 16)
- He prays that they will be rooted and established in love and have power (v. 17-18)
- He prays that they will grasp the love that passes knowledge and be filled (v. 19)

In our inclusive age – we had better note that there is nothing wrong with ‘Father’

- Jesus taught the disciples to pray to their ‘Father’
- We cannot get away from the fact that we must choose ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘it’
- ‘it’ is impersonal and cannot be used for a personal God
- motherly images for God in the Bible are rare and are normally similes (like, as)
- just because these images exist does not justify our calling God ‘mother’
- we need to be clear that ‘Father’ has nothing to do with maleness
- but it does have to do with God as our loving creator
- we need to be careful that in our quite proper desire to be sensitive and inclusive
- we do not allow the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be replaced
- by the less relational Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer (valuable as these titles are)
- all proper theology starts with good theology of God
- for Paul, even in prison, God is his loving Father – he believes in God’s Power

II HE BELIEVES IN GOD’S PROCLAMATION

This is a slightly clumsy way of putting it but I wanted to keep the letter ‘p’

- it is really God’s revelation and Paul’s proclamation
- Paul describes this revelation as the disclosure of a mystery (vv. 3, 6, 9)
- The mystery disclosed is that the Gentiles are included in Christ as equals
- That Gentiles were included in God’s promise to Abraham is not in doubt (Gen. 12:3)
- But nowhere in the Old Testament does it anticipate that they would be equals
- It was preaching this message that caused Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21:21, 28)

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 3:6)

What is lost in the translation from the Greek of the New Testament is the alliteration

- Being a fervent, faithful fan of alliteration
- I was pleased to find it from Paul’s prodigious, pen
- Paul uses the prefix ‘syn’ (meaning ‘with’ or ‘together’)
- The NIV renders that heirs together, members together, sharers together
- ‘co-heirs’, ‘co-members’, ‘co-partners’
- in Christ, Gentiles are co-heirs with Jews
- in Christ, they are co-members of the same body – with Christ as their head
- in Christ, they are co-partners –they share together

This good news of the gospel is that God accepts all who believe

- but the revelation of this good news is not for purely academic interest
- the gospel is not merely a good idea – but to show God’s eternal purposes
- with the intended result that lives are changed
- the foundation of the Christian proclamation is that God is uniquely revealed in Christ
- and the main task of gospel proclamation is to make that revelation known
- Paul is proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ
- Not that Christ cannot be known but that there is so much to be known

This is such an important task that it is the ministry of the whole people of God

- And not just a ministry of people who are appointed or ordained to ministry
- I believe that it is right that the church has a specialised ministry of the Word
- And I think that it is probably appropriate that the specialised ministry of the Word
- Is often linked with a ministry of the Christian sacraments
- But the word and the sacraments do not belong to the ministers but to the church
- To the whole people of God and the responsibility of knowing Christ
- And making Christ known is for the whole people of God and not for the few
- Paul believes in the God's Power, he believes in God's Proclamation, and

III HE BELIEVES IN GOD'S PEOPLE

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms

(Ephesians 3:10)

The expression 'through the church' comes as something of a surprise to us today

- But Paul says it is through the church that God's wisdom is demonstrated
- The very reason for the church's existence is to make known God's salvation

In English, 'church' is a somewhat difficult word

- Often it means 'a building used for church services'
- But this is not the meaning here – it means 'God's people'
- The word used in the Greek New Testament is 'ekklesia' (ecclesiastical)
- And 'ekklesia' means 'assembly', 'meeting', 'congregation'
- Many church people today think that they belong when they never meet
- But this is not the biblical understanding of the church
- Paul would have no understanding of the church member who never came

It seems to me that there are some important lessons here

- First we must remind ourselves that it is important to be Christians together
- The classic definition of the church is – a company of faithful people
- Where the word of God is preached and the sacraments duly ministered (BCP 19)
- On that definition there are some 'churches' in which I would not feel comfortable

For twelve years, I was a member and later team leader of Summer Fire

- A small Christian holiday and convention week at Southport
- There were many things to be positive about but there was certainly one negative
- When I returned home to my own local church it was easy to be discontented
- Maybe the preaching and teaching in my own local church was not as good
- Maybe the average age in my own local church was not as young
- Maybe the music in my own local church was not as dynamic and stimulating
- But that is no excuse for sitting lightly to the local church
- My responsibility was to try and share what I had gained with others
- Not to be the kind of superior Christian for whom the local church is not good enough
- And either come with a superior attitude or, worse still, not come at all

I learned very quickly in my ministry, which began in South London

- That many people are shopping around for a church
- People used to ask me, ‘why should I come to your church?’
- They were rather surprised when I replied, ‘I’m not sure you should’
- ‘You need a church where you are well enough fed not to be undernourished’
- ‘and well enough exercised, not to be a flabby, spiritual couch-potato’
- if that place is here you are welcome – if it is not here you are better off elsewhere

We might live in an age where people go to church to see what they can get

- and judge the experience of gathering with others by whether it pleased them
- and how much they feel that they got out of it – but that is to misunderstand ‘church’
- the community of faithful people where the word of God is proclaimed
- and the sacraments duly administered
- we meet people who say they have a lot of time for Jesus but no time for the church
- it is a thought that many people find stimulating – but it is not biblical
- for the church is not an optional part of Christianity
- it is the place where God is given honour and glory
- and is the evidence of God’s transforming and uniting power
- deciding not to meet with other Christians is not a biblical option
- superior Christians might not be concerned about the current state of the church
- but Jesus is ... and so is the Apostle Paul

I HE BELIEVES IN GOD’S POWER

II HE BELIEVES IN GOD’S PROCLAMATION

III HE BELIEVES IN GOD’S PEOPLE

IV HE BELIEVES IN GOD’S PURPOSE

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

(Ephesians 3:10-12)

It is easy to think that the eternal purpose of God is something in the future

- but literally the expression means ‘the purpose of the ages’
- which connects with ‘for ages past’ (v. 9)
- a critical and defining event in God’s eternal purpose
- has been accomplished in Christ, particularly in his death, resurrection and ascension
- it is through Christ that the believer may approach God with freedom and confidence
- the believer does not take approaching God for granted
- but can do so with boldness because of Jesus
- It is through God’s purpose in Christ that the believer finds confidence
- It is a focus on God’s faithfulness and not on our faith, that gives a right perspective

Now the picture is complete

- Even though Paul is in prison

I HE BELIEVES IN GOD'S POWER

- His inner faith is unshaken by outward circumstances
- He might be a prisoner but he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus

II HE BELIEVES IN GOD'S PROCLAMATION

- The mystery disclosed is that the Gentiles are included in Christ as equals
- In Christ all believers are 'co-heirs', 'co-members', 'co-partners'

III HE BELIEVES IN GOD'S PEOPLE

- God's wisdom is demonstrated through his people (the church)
- The very purpose of the church is to make God's salvation known

IV HE BELIEVES IN GOD'S PURPOSE

- God's eternal purposes unfolded decisively in the death and resurrection of Jesus
- it is through Christ that the believer has a right perspective on all things