

Sunday 11th July
The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
Reflection on Ephesians 1: 3-14
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I am sure you all agree that our churches come in different shapes and sizes. Because that's what humans are like – I'm relatively short in stature (or so my husband will happily announce), I don't follow football (sorry David and anyone else who's hoping that something comes home later today), and I enjoy my garden. None of you will be exactly like me. You may have no interest in gardening, perhaps you can't get enough of watching football matches, and you might not be vertically challenged! But each of us come together as one by our faith to make up groups and gatherings called church families or congregations. Different components, put together without following an instruction manual, will look and sound different on the surface inevitably. Variety is the spice of life as the saying goes – but we are all held together by one common belief in God. So it doesn't matter whether we meet on a screen, or in a cathedral or in a village church – the important thing is that we are committed to serving God and that we should set aside our human differences to do so. The church is about people, after all.

This whole section of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus is about one mutually cohesive aspect of serving God: to give praise – it begins with 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'; and it finishes with 'to the praise of his glory'. It is a joyous, confident, inclusive piece of text – encouraging its readers and listeners to be sure of why we should praise God.

So let's begin this reflection by putting the reading briefly into its rightful context: Paul is writing to one of the many churches he and his co-workers established during a relatively short time. It is not a corrective or confrontational letter as some others might be considered to be; it is a simple but masterful letter of encouragement, and it's all about God's purpose – or what we might call God's vision for his Kingdom in which we are wholly included.

I have a new pair of glasses which I collected on Friday. My eyesight is not quite as good as it used to be and now I find I have to have help with my long distance as well as my short distance sight – a sign of maturity, perhaps! These new glasses should help me to see better and more clearly – they should help me with my own capacity for clear vision – but I need to get used to them first.

One of the words in this reading from Ephesians that just jumps out at me – with or without the help of my new glasses – is 'lavish'. This word we associate with something positive, something luxurious, plentiful, generous. We might think of it to describe a special meal, or a plush hotel, or a once-in-a-lifetime holiday or service. Here it's used to describe the riches of God's grace which he has 'freely given us in the One he loves', in other words in the gift of God's Son Jesus through whom we have redemption – the price Jesus paid to release us from the slavery of sin. What could possibly be a more lavish gift than that?

And we should remember that we can't earn that gift, we can't make ourselves deserve it. Paul makes that very clear in his teaching – we don't gain grace through anything that we do, this isn't a point-scoring life that will open the gates of heaven to us! It is by the grace of God that we are gifted – it's freely given by the love of God. It is part of his plan, his vision, our predestiny – God chooses to save us.

The Ephesians are told by Paul that they are predestined to adoption to sonship – before the creation of the world even – and by extension, because the word is offered to non-Jews and to anyone who believes, that

means you and I too. God's vision is to bring us into sonship through Jesus Christ – and it is by God's pleasure and his will – as part of his vision, if you like. In Roman law adoption was a fairly common practice, especially when a child could be an additional labour source to top up a family's income, and adopted children had the same rights as biological children. Paul uses the term 'adoption' to show how strong our relationship to God is. God wants to be our father – and we pray that it is so every time we say The Lord's Prayer, addressing 'Our Father in heaven'.

So God's purpose is to offer salvation as sovereign Lord. He 'works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will' is what is written in verse 11 – followed by the reason why. And that reason is that we, who put our hope in Christ as did Paul and the early church in Ephesus, 'might be for the praise of his glory'. In other words God wills it that we should praise him and, by doing so, we may magnify his glory.

The proof of this is in the Holy Spirit who has been sent to us by God as a kind of 'deposit guaranteeing our inheritance'. I hope you share with me considerable comfort in the belief that God has put down a deposit for our salvation – particularly in difficult times when we're challenged by all sorts of distractions, good or bad. We don't need to be anxious – the down payment is made, God is Lord, and he is in control. We just need to let him continue to transform us to his pleasure and will.

God's purpose will then be put into effect, 'the times will reach their fulfilment', and unity will be brought to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ'. As our earthly lives move nearer to those times, let us remember always to praise God for our blessings.

In conclusion, we don't need to travel on a luxury holiday to discover the grace of God, nor visit an excessively opulent and exotic location, or sit down to an extravagant feast. No, all we have to do is wake up, open our eyes and put on our new glasses, take a breath, and look for the luxurious grace of God all around us and inside us and in others, and beneath life itself.