

'The Glory of the Church'
Sunday 15th May 2011
Cotton End Baptist Church
Ephesians 3 v 14 - 20

Good morning.

Well... What a week it has been in the life of Cotton End Baptist Church! At its Members Meeting on Wednesday evening, Paul Joel was appointed to be your new minister. It was a delight to read the email from Angela. I had been praying that at the end of this sermon series that a new minister might be on their way. God does indeed answer prayer...

That should be news and great joy! It is, then somewhat appropriate that my thoughts this week have as its background - joy and the church. It wasn't until I was listening to Paul speak to us last week that I was reminded how difficult the opening verses of Ephesians chapter 3 actually were.

Who remembers what Paul shared?

Paul spoke last week about the fellowship of Christ, which both Jew and Gentile believers are invited into. This, he said was true for those at the time of the letter but more importantly for us, here and now - even in Cotton End. I want to pick up this morning where he left off.

Ephesians 3 verse 14 and following:

Let us pray:

I am informed by Becky that Richard when he was serving the church here at Cotton End used to speak on Jim Elliot. Well, I want to pick him up this morning too. At the time of his death in 1956, Jim Elliot was trying to reach the Auca Indians of South America for the Lord. Just three years earlier, after watching an Indian die in a jungle hut, he had affirmed his willingness to serve God and die if necessary among these people. Then he added this petition: "Lord, let me live until I have declared Thy works to this generation." Jim Elliot didn't expect God to answer his prayer by letting him be speared to death before he was thirty years old. But neither did he have any idea that within three years his name would be known all over the world and that his journals would challenge many to give themselves to the Lord's service. He's been with the Lord for more than thirty years, but he is still "speaking" to thousands of people.

Can I encourage you to hold that image in your mind, as we explore these latter verses.

This final section in this chapter, starting at v 14, we hear a great doxology, perhaps it is one of the greatest in the whole of scripture. In the verses just before this doxology, Paul expresses a height beyond which neither reason nor imagination can go. He had been speaking of God's purposes for his church and in particular the purpose Paul mentions is that we, us to might be filled to the measure of the fullness of God (v 19).

When we talk as Christians, it is fair to conclude that this idea is both hard for us to communicate and understand; it is really beyond our wildest imagination, how can we be filled with God's own fullness? We stand on the edge of something infinite, as the GNB says. The

Apostle Paul has really prayed for something that is beyond our imagination therefore he now bursts forth into praise to God in this doxology, our verses today. He confirms in it that God is able to do more than we can ask or imagine.

So to my firm text this morning - Ephesians 3 v 20

1. GOD IS ABLE TO DO THE UNIMAGINABLE (v 20)

Paul, in this letter says that God is able to do much more than we could ever ask him for or imagine. What would you really like God to do; well God is able to do much more than that. Now as we read this sentence in English, it seems as if Paul is really struggling to find the words to use and that is true; he is trying to describe the indescribable but this is even more noticeable in the Greek Language. The idea behind the word 'able' in the Greek is the idea of being 'able above and beyond all things.' Perhaps the sentence could read like this. "Now to him who is able above all things to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all we can ask or think or imagine." Paul simply does not have adequate language to say what he wants to say.

He is struggling to find enough adjectives to describe God's power. I know if I was sat in Paul's position, I'd struggle to.

I want you to imagine; yes, run wild for a minute and dream the dream concerning what we would love God to do.

Turn to your neighbour, just for a moment and share these.

Any thoughts?

Well Paul says God is able to do even more than that. We pray weekly that our nation could be completely transformed, God is able to do more than that. We pray that the world might be won for Gospel; God is able to do more than that. Let's try world peace, well God is able to do more than that. That is Paul's point here, God is able, and God is powerful,

Now can you see how this helps our prayer lives? Although we probably don't like to think that this is true of us, I suspect that we all only ask God for what we think is possible or what we can perceive to be possible. On those occasions when we go beyond that and ask for something, which we wish, would happen but we simply can't see it happening then, if we are honest, doubts begin to creep into our mind. We often have doubts about what we consider to be impossible requests. Have you never spoken to someone who is so hardened against God that we think to ourselves even if we never say it "O she will never be saved?"

He is a hopeless case he will never change. Or perhaps there is a professing believer who simply displays attitudes that are so unchristian and has done so for so long; that we write him off saying to ourselves he is never going to change. That is just the way he is.

Well, Paul is saying to us that we must not harbour such thoughts because our God is able, he is eternal and absolute and is able to do more than we can ask him for or even imagine him doing. That's why every time we come to our God in prayer it's good to remind ourselves of whom we are praying too. A suggestion which you might find helpful; why not read this verse before we pray just to cast out of our minds and hearts any doubts that we might have.

It's good to be reminded of God's ability to answer and to do all that we ask and request. He has the power and the ability to do all that we ask of him or even imagine him doing.

I want to encourage you therefore, let's be bold and courageous in our praying. Let us bring what we consider to be our most impossible requests to God; let us be bold to bring all our wildest dreams to God for there is no danger of exhausting God's ability or power to answer. His power and grace is beyond all that we can ever ask. He is able to do what is beyond the bounds of possibility; he is able to do what seems to be unattainable. I am labouring this point I know, but I am trying to get us to understand and to realise just how powerful our God really is.

We naturally try to limit the eternal and absolute power of God to our own understanding or to our own concepts or to our own imagination but God's power is beyond that. That ought encourage us to pray and it ought to encourage us to believe with passion when we pray.

This truth if only we could grasp it would cast out doubts from our hearts. In case you think that this is just a statement about God without any substance then let me turn you to the birth of Our Lord. Could you imagine God becoming man? Could we imagine this God being born into this world through a virgin?

I don't think you would ever imagine that happening and yet that is exactly what God did in the coming of his Son to earth for me, and you. Earlier this week, I was in London but in place of lunch, I attended the Eucharist at Westminster Abbey and the president, the Chaplain of the Archbishop of Canterbury reminded us that just as we continue in the celebration of Easter until Pentecost, let us never the whole message of the events of Christ.

Being God, he became man in Our Lord and was born of the Virgin Mary. As I said on Boxing Day in my reflections, Jesus is a true example of God doing more than we would ask for or ever imagine. This is even without all the miracles that he did. I think it would be fair to conclude that there is plenty of proof in the Scriptures of God's power at work, at God doing the impossible, going beyond what we even considered asking for.

So let me encourage you never to give up praying for people who seem to be getting harder to the gospel, never give up praying for those who seem to be getting weaker in body, and never stop praying for one whose circumstances seem to get worst by the day not better even though you have prayed for them for years. I urge you to encourage your heart with this truth that God is able to do more than we can ask for or even imagine.

This is pure joy!

2. GOD IS AT WORK IN HIS PEOPLE (v 20)

This God of power is the same God who is at work in his people, the church. It's easy to read Paul's marvellous statement about God's power and yet feel that it is all very remote it is all far removed from daily life and experience. But Paul is actually saying that our own experience of God's power demonstrates that he is able to do more than we can ask of him or even imagine. No doubt Paul could not help but think about God's power at work in him here.

If anyone had any doubt about God's power look at the Apostle Paul. Scripture as Paul reminded us again last week that Saul who became Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor of the church, he hated Christ and he showed it by seeking to destroy all who followed him. He hated Christianity and loved Judaism. Nevertheless, God in his power came, saved and transformed such a man as him. The God who is so powerful that he can do the impossible did the impossible in Paul. Paul could never change himself even if he wanted to which he didn't of course.

No one would convince Paul he was wrong he was far too self-righteous for that but God came to him in power and made him into an apostle and not any apostle but an apostle to the Gentiles the very people he despised as a Jew. Who and what made Paul a new man, God did it and he did it by his immeasurable power? But Paul's point is that God's power was not only at work in his life but it was at work in the life of these Ephesian believers as well.

Mervyn in his studies on Chapter 2 of Ephesians recalled that; they were dead in their sins and now they are alive in Christ Jesus and members of God's household and family (Ephesians 2:1-3 & 11-12). What happened to change such people? God did it by his power. No one believes the gospel by themselves, it takes the power of God by his Spirit to convince us of his truth and to convert us and transform us. If you are a Christian then you are a Christian because of God and his power at work within your life.

He is the one who has convinced you of his word and has regenerated your heart, so that you came before God, in weakness to believe in Jesus for salvation. It's often hard to communicate but your conversion is evidence that God is powerful that God is able to answer the prayers of his people for someone somewhere prayed for you while you were still in your sin and rebellion of heart. You and I give clear evidence that God is able to do more than all we ask or imagine, for some people could never have imagined us being saved.

Paul's point is if God can do that for you and continues to work in your heart to change you, if he can do that then he can do anything, he can do everything.

There is no limit to the power of God.

God's power within us will be creating spiritual desires, desires to pray, desires for holiness of life, desires to read his word and meet with his precious people.

All these things are evidence of God's power at work in your life. Are you aware of God dealing with you, do you know the moving of His Spirit within your life? If so then, I'm sorry but you must conclude that God is at work by his power and if he is doing that for you then you must go on and ask for God's power to continue working in the lives of all his people. You and I ought to be convinced that there is no one beyond the reach of God's power; if God has done so much for us by his power then he can do it for others.

It's good to look for the evidence within our own lives but we must do it not so that we can boast about it but so that we will be encouraged to ask God to do in others what he is doing in us. We can also have confidence to ask God to do in us what he is doing in others. We can ask in confidence because we know that he is so powerful that he is able to do all that we can ask for or even imagine. Let God's work in us be our spur to pray for the impossible in others.

3. GOD IS TO RECEIVE ALL THE GLORY (v 21)

It is no wonder that Paul finishes this doxology with this statement "to him be the glory" Paul has highlighted the fact that God is powerful that he can do more than we could ever ask him for. Paul's says God can do more than we can ever imagine because God is powerful. His power is seen in his people by saving them and by his work of sanctification by his Spirit. This work is all as a result of God's power so no wonder Paul says to him be glory.

But notice where God's glory is seen, notice where God is glorified.

a) He is glorified in the Church -

The church is a miracle. Paul has taken some time in this letter to explain not just how these spiritually dead Ephesians were made alive in Christ but how those who were strangers and aliens to God and to his covenant promises and are now members of his church. As a result they receive the same privileges and benefits that believing Jews receive. They are now one with all believing Jews they are now part of the body of Christ.

Going back to last week, the barrier between the Jew and Gentile has been broken down as a result of Christ and his work of redemption. The church is one in Christ Jesus. Now its as this oneness is displayed and worked out in the church that the glory of God becomes manifest. That's why a church that is not united brings dishonour to God rather than glory. That's why in 4:3 Paul urges the church to make every effort to keep the unity of the church because the glory of God is at stake.

If there is one area of the church that Satan seeks to attack more than others it is its unity. We are united in our worship, our prayer life together and our acting on that. If he can get discord to rein in churches then he knows that God who is powerful is robbed of the glory due to his name. Disharmony comes into churches not usually over some doctrinal issue but over some small thing some personality class or some disagreement over the building or over styles of music or dress.

It's not that those are not important issues but they ought not to be issues over which we allow discord to come into the church. We are blessed in our church with unity, we have our moments like all churches but the unity in this church is impressive. So we need to beware, that we do not let our guard drop for Satan is seeking an opportunity to bring discord into our church and if he succeeds then God will not be glorified in our church.

But if people see our church functioning, as it should function then Glory will be brought to God.

b) He is glorified in Christ Jesus -

Some translator's think that this phrase should read "through Christ Jesus." So that this verse means that God is glorified in the church through Christ Jesus. Well that would be true of course but I don't think that is what Paul is saying. He is saying that God is glorified in the church when people see his power at work there. God is also glorified in Christ Jesus when people see God's power at work in Him.

Of course the church only comes into being because of Christ Jesus but Paul's focus is upon Christ and God's power at work in him. I have already said that Christ's whole work was a work of power from his incarnation to his ascension but we must not miss the point of Christ Jesus

life and ministry. Ultimately it was to bring glory to God. As we look and examine his life, his words, his actions, and his passions then we must simply see God's power at work and as a result we must bring glory to God.

Sometimes we can view Christ work for what he has done for us and that is right but ultimately Christ's work should lead us to glorify God. Although at times the church robs God of his glory we can never say that of the life and ministry of Jesus, Jesus always brought glory to His Father, God's name is honoured and glorified through the work of his Son, which of course was accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is not just to get the glory, as the power of God is manifest in the church and in Jesus in this generation but in every generation. He is not just to be given the glory now but forever and ever, for all eternity God will be glorified and his glory will be seen and manifest in his church and in his Son. That's why we ought to live lives pleasing to God so that he gets the glory in this our generation.

That's why we ought never to think lightly of the church for it manifests the glory of God. Finally that's why we should ponder and contemplate Jesus Christ for in him we see the glory of God.

I invite you to read aloud with this verse with me-

"To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever!"

And all the people said - Amen.

Let us never lose heart in this great God.