

EPHESIANS 1:1-14
TRUTH THAT SINGS!

Have you seen the film *Slumdog Millionaire*? They told us before we went that it was a 'feel-good movie', but in fact it is quite harrowing. It is built around the Indian version of the TV programme 'Who wants to be a millionaire?' A young man from the slums of Mumbai becomes a contestant and has to answer all of these questions and the film is very cleverly built round the answers; you see why this young man from the slums knows the answers. In the end, the last question is for millions of rupees; he will make himself rich if he wins; will he win? It is these last 10 minutes that make it a feel-good movie! The desire to be rich, to be wealthy people is still with us and is so much on people's minds because the last 9 months have shown how fickle and fragile wealth can be; those who thought they were wealthy, who were set up for life, are not any more; our confidence in the financial systems and banks is shattered; but we still want to be wealthy, with money and possessions.

All of a sudden, we are made to sit up and take note of another reality. There are other kinds of wealth; there are other ways in which to be rich; financial wealth is but one kind of wealth. Good relationships make us rich: family life and friendships are good for us to have and money can't buy them. We can be rich in the qualities of life: hope, peace, forgiveness, acceptance, self-esteem, and again these are not bought with cash. We can be people with qualities: faith, hope, love; these are qualities that are precious and valuable. If financial wealth has disappeared, what takes its place? In what ways are we rich?

An old man died a few years ago; most people in his village knew him; he went to the Post Office every week for his pension, usually borrowing money for a stamp; he dressed poorly and lived poorly and everyone assumed that he was simply living on his pension. Yet, when he died, those who knew him were shocked to discover that he had £2million in the bank. He was wealthy, but he lived as if he had nothing. So often, it seems to me, this is a little parable of the Church; the Church lives like this. We are people who are rich beyond measure with spiritual treasure, but we live as if we have next to nothing; our heads are down, our shoulders slumped, we have no confidence in ourselves or in God, we wonder if we have anything to offer anyone else; we complain about life; when in fact God has lavished His love upon us and we have a treasure-store of blessing.

John Mackay was the President of Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey in the 1930's, but he grew up in the Scottish Highlands. As a boy of 14, he read Ephesians and later said: "to this book I owe my life... I saw a new world... everything was new... I had a new outlook, new experiences, new attitudes to other people. I loved God, Jesus became the centre of everything... I was really alive." Later, he wrote about Ephesians "This letter is pure music... what we read here is truth that sings, doctrine set to music." (quo in John Stott *God's New Society* p.15) Over the next few weeks we are going to look at Paul's letter to the Ephesians, so that we can learn some of this 'truth that sings'; so that our understanding of God is bigger, so that we know more of Jesus; so that our faith is stronger; so that we can see how rich we are, spiritually, as Christians; so that we have a new, deeper sense of confidence in God.

Paul does two things in Ephesians: first of all, he outlines some of the key themes of Christian faith, this is what Christians believe, this is what the gospel is all about; this is what God has done for us in Jesus. Then secondly, he shows us how Christians should live and behave and there are bits about attitudes and behaviour, about relationships, about marriage, family life, work, and we will come to these later. For

Paul, this is always the order of things: what we believe comes first. People have this caricature of Church, that they don't know what the Church stands for, but they know what it stands against; this is what you must not do, if you are to be part of the Church and these tend to be moral questions. But we live at a time when it is becoming more and more important that we know what we stand for, what the Church is about, what Christians believe; so we will take next few weeks to look at the first part of Ephesians, a bit at a time.

Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence. Our translations break it up, but originally it is one long sentence, which simply pours out one phrase upon another of what God has done for us. This makes it a quite difficult passage to read aloud. Here is the big picture, the whole story and it leads Paul to sing. "*Praise be...*" (1:3) It is a "continuous stream of worship" (Tom Wright); "(Paul) begins by blessing God for blessing us with every conceivable blessing." (John Stott p32) Here is a picture of what God has done for us; phrase upon phrase, sentence upon sentence, building up the whole big picture of God's blessing on our lives. So, how should we respond? With thankfulness and worship and praise. We may not understand all that Paul says here; there may be bits that go way over our heads, but the whole big picture is of God at work to lavish His love and His blessings upon us, to give us all that we need, to bring every blessing to us.

"*He has...*" (v3) There is a way of thinking, that tends to come from the USA and the televangelists, that Christians should be prosperous and wealthy, that if we are walking with God and God is blessing us, then He will make us materially rich! This reflects something of an Old Testament way of thinking that saw God prosper His people by giving them sheep and cattle; the more sheep and cattle, the bigger the bank balance, the more God has blessed! God's blessing was seen in material things. Paul is clear: the gospel blessings that God pours out on us are spiritual blessings; God's new gifts are for our inner person; His blessings are for heart and mind and soul; this wealth will not show up in our bank account, but it will make a difference to kind of people we are and way we look at life. Because these blessings are spiritual, we can't see them, but that doesn't mean they are not real; these blessings are very real and make a real difference to our lives; they made John Mackay come alive!

It is hard to do justice to this passage without making a list of these blessings that God has given:

Chosen – this was God's plan from before the beginning of time, that He decided to bless us and the world.

Holy and blameless – this is how God sees us now and what we are working towards and will be.

Love – the motivation behind all of this is the immense love that God has for us.

Adopted us to be His children – there is no greater honour than to be called the children of God.

Grace – God's love to people who are not worthy of it – more of that in chapter 2.

Redemption – this is a slavery word, and is all about freedom; people set free at the payment of a price.

Forgiveness – is about our freedom; Jesus has set us free from the guilt and power of sin; the price paid is His life; He died that we might be forgiven.

Wisdom and understanding – we are able to see to the heart of things, what matters.

Revealed mystery – God has shown us what He has done and what it all means.

Hope – there is more to see in future, yet more to come, more to enjoy.

Word of truth – there is good news to hear, good news that comes from God.

Salvation – the word that sums up all of these other blessings; God has saved us, rescued us

Spirit as a seal and guarantee – this is an idea from the business world, we pay a deposit on something as the guarantee that we will pay rest; the Spirit is the deposit, God living in us now as the down-payment on more that is yet to come.

Inheritance – the whole world is going to be made new and one day Jesus will be the centre of everything in a completely new way; the whole cosmos will have Jesus as its centre and we will share in His glory; that will be our inheritance.

If you've not grasped something of that list, never mind; that's not the point; the point is to take away something of the impression of the big picture; to see in how many ways God has blessed us; there are some 14 items on that list and if you want to read it again you will find it when sermon goes on the website sometime next week. 14 gifts and graces that God has given to us, ways in which He has already blessed us and will bless us again and again.

There is one last theme and two little words that appear over and over again: 'In Christ'. Ten or eleven times we find these words or similar. All of these gifts and graces are ours in Christ. First of all, that means that it is in and through Jesus that God has blessed the world; any idea of God that does not have Jesus firmly at the centre is not enough; Jesus is at the centre of God's plan to bless world and to bless us. Secondly, we have these gifts and graces by faith in Jesus; these are gifts that God gives for faith and through faith in Jesus; we are connected to Jesus by faith and through that connection the blessings of God come to us. We don't have to work for them, or earn them, or even deserve them; God gives them to us; God lavishes His love upon us 'in Christ'.

Someone has said that this passage is like a snowball, going downhill, rolling through the snow and picking up more and more snow, getting bigger and bigger as it rolls, just as it does when you're making a snowman. So God chose us, then He made us His children, then we have freedom and forgiveness, then an inheritance that will include the whole cosmos. Now I'm not bothered if you don't understand all of the individual bits of this passage today; if you want to ask me questions then feel free. What I would love you to see is the scale of this big picture, the sheer size of God's blessing, the huge picture of God's blessing on us and for us. Then to rejoice that God has done all of this for us; this is truth that sings, that leads us to rejoice, to praise, to worship, that it makes us alive in a whole new way.

There was a deaf man and his friends brought him to Jesus; Jesus put His fingers in the man's ears and touched his tongue and healed him. People were amazed at Jesus; Mark tells us that they were "*overwhelmed with amazement*" at what Jesus did for their friend. They had seen Jesus do this wonderful thing and it took their breath away. Be amazed at Ephesians 1! Be amazed at the wealth of treasure that God has given us! Be amazed at what God has done for us, what God has given to us! Be amazed at the love God has lavished on us! Be amazed at the whole big picture; see the size of this, see the scale of this; see that your story of faith fits into God's big picture. Then sing! Rejoice! We are wealthy people in Christ; leave with more of a spring in your step; sing the last hymn with new energy 'my heart is filled with thankfulness' – so it should be! "*Praise be...*" (v3) This is truth that sings!