

EPHESIANS 1:15-23
HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

What are your hopes and aspirations? We all have them. We have them for ourselves; they change with time and circumstances, but we have them all the time: your aspiration might be to find a job, not easy in the current climate, or to be healthy again because you've been facing up to being ill; or it might be to lose weight or to survive a crisis time in your life. We also have faith aspirations: many of us come here on Sunday quite deliberately hoping to learn something that will make our faith stronger and make us more able to live life as a Christian. Some are here perhaps because we are trying to find out what faith means and are trying to discover what faith might give us, what faith might add to our life and I hope that I can help you with that; come and talk to me. These are all hopes and aspirations that we have for ourselves.

We have hopes and aspirations for other people too. Parents have hopes and aspirations for their children: their baby is born and parents hope that the baby is well, healthy, and fit; the desire to have the baby baptised reflects an inherent desire for the best for our children; again these hopes and aspirations change as time goes by and at different stages in life parents have different hopes and aspirations – that our children succeed at school, that they fulfil their potential for whatever they may be good at, they get a job, or a place at university, then graduate and work; I have to say that these hopes and aspirations never go away – I have met elderly parents who still express hopes and aspirations for their adult children and a sense of frustration that their adult children seem to be making the wrong choices – it's a parent thing! It can go too far, of course – parents can drive their children to fulfil their hopes and aspirations for their children, when the children's own aspirations are very different! We have hopes and aspirations for other people of which this is but one example.

We can have these hopes and aspirations for Church too. For people who have been a part of church for a long time, we can have certain hopes for the Church to which we belong, hopes for its future life, that it will continue to survive, or that Church will draw new people, the next generation of believers. If you are new to church, you also have hopes for what Church will mean to you; if you are trying Church out, you hope that we will add some value to your experience of life, or meet some need or hope, otherwise you wouldn't be here, I suppose. Or, you hope that Church will change to meet your own particular need in the way that you find best. We could have 150 individual sets of hopes and aspirations for Church in the room today, all expressed in slightly different ways!

From the very beginning, Christians have expressed these hopes and aspirations in prayer. In every generation, Christians have understood that God is able to help us with these hopes and aspirations, that He might just be able to help us fulfil our hopes, or even help us understand what hopes and aspirations we should have in the first place. Prayer sees 2 things: first of all, prayer sees that God is there and so prayer is an expression of the faith that God exists; and secondly, prayer is a confidence that God is able and willing to help us live life well. Prayer is no magic formula – 'say right words and blessing will come!' – but it is an expression of the desires of our hearts in the presence of God. It is entirely right that all of these hopes and aspirations which we have already talked about, for ourselves, for our life and faith, for others (eg parents for children), for the Church – it is entirely right that all of these can be expressed in prayer; God is interested in us; God hears our prayers; God will answer our prayers.

Paul has his hopes and aspirations as Church leader, for people that he knows and loves. Paul sometimes gets a bad press as a hard-hearted man who was hard to please! In fact, the very opposite is true; he seems to have been a very caring man, a genuinely caring Christian leader, whose only desire was to see people he knew and loved fulfil their potential as children of God. So he prays here for the Christians in Ephesus, that God will bless them. Paul had spent 3 years in Ephesus, so he would have got to know very well some of people to whom he is writing; this letter was written quite a long while after that and so there would be new people in the Church, people that he didn't know, but maybe this letter was result of a visit or some correspondence, news that he had heard. Ephesians 1:15-23 is the first of two prayers in this letter, that Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus. In this prayer, he expresses something of his hopes for these people that he knows and loves.

The first thing Paul does is to say 'thank you' to God for his friends in Ephesus: "*Ever since...*" (v15f) He has just spent 12 verses reminding them of the ways in which God has blessed them in Christ, the 14 gifts and graces that are theirs in Christ and for faith. Now he wants to give thanks to God for their faith and love. It is so easy to criticise the Church; almost everyone who comes in contact with Church has a story that they will tell you of a bad experience of Church; I have them too; it is so easy to get into that frame of mind that shows up all the church's faults and failings and we have them here too in Juniper Green. But, the Church is also a family of faith and at its best a family in which love for one another is expressed most powerfully. It is a good idea, each day, or every time you pray for the Church and how wish the Church would change and be different, or complain about Church, to thank God for the faith and love of the people you know in Church.

Paul has 3 hopes and aspirations for Church in Ephesus:

1. **Know God better** – "*I keep...*" (v17) In any relationship we have with another person, at the beginning we know certain things about them, we know them in a certain way, perhaps a superficial way. If that relationship lasts 30 years, after that length of time, we know them in a quite different way, we know them more intimately, we know what makes them tick, we have shared experiences that have shaped their personality and deepened our relationship; after 30 years know them better. The same is true with faith and our relationship with God: at the beginning know certain things about God and what Bible says God is like, but as we live life and experience life's good things and hard things and had sense that God is with us in these experiences, or we've had to relate Christian faith to our life experience, then our faith is deepened and we know God better. Paul's hope and aspiration and prayer for the Christians in Ephesus is exactly that, that they know God better especially by understanding more and more clearly the ways in which God has blessed them with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Go back to verses 3-14; try to understand what God has done; read your Bible, talk to other Christians, learn more about God and get to know Him better. Work of God's Spirit to help us understand and appreciate blessing of God on our lives.

2. **Know the hope God gives** – "*I pray...*" (v18) Hope is one of these great qualities of life that people always seem to need. Look at pictures on television of any group of people facing some kind of natural disaster and see the despair written across their faces. When I visited Cambodia in 2006, the people on the surface seemed happy, but when you scratch the surface, those many thousands who were poor were actually full of despair because they couldn't break the cycle of poverty, they were stuck. In 2009 in the UK, there are lots of people looking for some kind of hope: they had placed their hope in wealth and the money markets, but that has gone and are now looking for something to replace it; any faith we had in the government has gone. Hope is one of the key features of the Christian gospel; we

have hope! God gives hope! The hope we have is listed in the 14 gifts and graces of Eph 1:3-14; this is the inheritance to which Paul refers; our hope is found, not in ourselves, but in God's blessing promised and given to us in Christ; part of that is for us now, as our experience of life and faith now; part of that hope is that there is more to come, a hope for the future and for heaven. Our hope is in God who lavishes His love upon us and who promises to be with us always and everywhere and bless us.

3. **Know the power of God** – *“And His...” (v19f)* We have all of these hopes and aspirations for life and one reaction we can have to all of this is a sense of weakness; we have these hopes and aspirations, but we can do nothing to fulfil them; they are a pipe-dream for ourselves or for others; we can have a sense of frustration and weakness that although we know what we long to do, we just can't ever get there. But, for Paul, the power of God is at work in His people. Easter is about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead; He who died is now raised to live forever; we don't know how it happened, but we can safely say that this is the greatest demonstration of the power of God ever. That same power is at work in us; the same power that raised Jesus is at work in us day after day; the strength of God is for us and in us to help us live life well and in the best way.

The Roman centurion had hopes and aspirations: his hope was that his servant would be healed; perhaps it was becoming a desperate hope because no-one had been able to heal the servant. So he came to Jesus asking for help; Jesus offered to go to the man and heal him, but the centurion said *“Just say...” (Mt 8:8)* Jesus was amazed at the man's faith, that he was willing to believe and accept that Jesus is able to answer his prayers, even from a distance. The man's prayers were answered, his hopes were fulfilled and his servant was healed. It is not always as simple and straightforward as that; sometimes it is more like wrestling with God and the Bible and ourselves before we see God answer our prayers, but this is a great picture of the way in which it is with us when we pray.

I don't know what your hopes and aspirations are; I don't know what your personal aspirations might be, or how you would express any faith-based ones; or what aspirations you might have for other people today; or how you would express these for Church. If you don't know what hopes and aspirations to have here are three to start of with! We can express all of our hopes and aspirations in prayer: to find the right ones, to fulfil them, whether for ourselves, or others, or Church. God hears us; God is able to help us, to guide us, to strengthen us. Paul knew that; may we see that too!