

EPHESIANS 3:1-13
WHAT A STORY TO TELL!

What are you expecting from the next few minutes? We have been singing, reading the bible together, we have been praying and now we come to the bit called 'the sermon'. What are you expecting will happen now? That I'll talk for a few minutes, up to 20, perhaps, but you really hope that it will be no more than that? Or you're expecting to have a nice quiet snooze in the corner while someone drones on in the distance? Or that there will be lots of jokes, with a few cartoon pictures on the screen to make you smile? Or maybe you don't know what to expect because Church is new to you today and you have come and you don't know what will happen next? Or are you expecting something more than that? That I will say something that will help you in your Christian faith, something that might help you live life more effectively as a Christian, something that will help you understand the Bible better? What do you expect of this preacher and these few minutes for which I will speak and that we call sermon?

PT Forsyth was a Christian theologian and Churchman who died in 1921. He once said that "with its preaching, Christianity stands or falls." That is a big, bold statement. It is too big now? Churches do all kinds of things to share the Christian faith with other people or help us learn the Bible; we use all sorts of technology, through the Church website and CD recordings and podcasts and twitter, so why do we still bother preaching sermons? This is perhaps the only place now where you come across someone standing at the front and speaking uninterrupted for 20 minutes or so; so why do we still do it? Christianity has had a long and honourable tradition of preaching sermons and there is a point to PT Forsyth's words as we shall see today; by its preaching, the Church is doing something important and powerful and I hope that is what we'll discover.

Paul in Ephesians has been explaining to the Christians of Ephesus something of the heart of the Christian message. He began by reminding them of the many ways in which God has blessed them in and through Jesus; then he prayed that they grow in their understanding of these blessings; then, in chapter 2, he wrote about 'grace' and we saw a couple of weeks ago that grace is all about God giving us blessing that we don't deserve, lavishing His love upon us even when we're not lovable; then last week, we said that everyone comes to God in same way, we are all equal before God, all accepted by God through Jesus and so we should accept one another and treat one another well; all that divides and separates us from one another is swept away by Jesus.

'Now, says Paul, my job is to tell people this message!' In Ephesians 3:1-13, we have one of these rare pieces in Paul's letters where he talks about himself and his own experience of faith and life. He begins by telling us that he is a prisoner: it may be that he wrote this letter under house arrest in Rome, a prisoner awaiting a hearing from Caesar. For some reason that leads him to write about the job to which God has called him as an apostle. "*I became...*" (vv7f) We need to go back a few years to a road leading to the Syrian city of Damascus and Saul of Tarsus is travelling to the city to persecute the Christians, to find any Christians in that city and arrest them and throw them in prison. He is a Jew who thinks that this new Christian sect is wrong, their message is blasphemy and should be stamped out. But before Saul gets to Damascus, he has a vision, an encounter with the risen Christ – "*Who are you Lord? I am Jesus...*" Later, God says of Saul, to become Paul: "*This man...*" (Acts 9:5, 15) From that moment on, Paul's life was changed; he was no longer the persecutor of the Church, though he never forgot what he had once been and so he describes

himself as “*less than...*” (v.8), but from that moment on, he became a preacher of the good news, someone who travelled the world telling people about Jesus.

He talks about it here as a mystery. Let’s not be confused; this is not about secret codes, that only the in-crowd know. Here ‘mystery’ simply means something that God has shown him and that is new to people. The mystery that he preaches is this: “*The mystery...*” (3:6) The people who once were excluded from the blessing of God are now equal; the blessing of God is for everyone, all across world, in exactly the same way, through faith in Jesus and Paul travelled the world telling people about Jesus, sharing with people the things that he has discovered for himself. The amazing thing was that as Paul travelled across the world telling people about Jesus, many of these people believed his message and became Christians and his preaching touched people’s lives in the most amazing ways.

“*I became...*” (v.7,8) A few years ago, my wife and I had a holiday in Russia and one of the places we visited was the Catherine Palace outside St Petersburg, in the village of Pushkin; the palace that had belonged to Katherine Great and the Czars. It is a most amazing place: the most famous room in the palace is the Amber Room that was demolished during the Second World War and then rebuilt, but there are others rooms too and some of the photos on the screen show the glory of that place. This is one of these places that really does take your breath away in its splendour, wealth and beauty because every room, one after the other speaks of wealth and glory.

“*Unsearchable riches*” Someone suggests that preacher’s job is to help Christians explore from room to room in the king’s palace, to relish the glory and splendour of the ways in which God has blessed us in Jesus. The most unforgivable sin for the preacher is to be boring; how can you talk to people about ‘unsearchable riches’ and be boring? That is the task that God gave to Paul and that is the task that I believe I still have today as someone whom God has called to be a minister of His Church and a preacher of the gospel. My job is not to make you laugh by telling you funny stories, though I know that can help! My job is not to tell you what I think about life and bible and faith. My job is to take you from room to room in the king’s palace and say to you ‘Look here, see what God has done; look here now, see something else that God has done.’ I have been doing this for 26 years nearly and will do it for some time yet; do you know what bothers me most? That I won’t have time to show you every room in the palace!

“What is certain about the wealth Christ has and gives is that we shall never come to an end of it” (John Stott) Peace, hope, love, acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, freedom, joy, access to God, power and strength – go back to chapter one and there are fourteen different gifts and graces of God listed there, gifts and graces that God has lavished upon us in and through Jesus and if you want to explore these further, the sermon is on the website! These riches are for us and for all of us; God has given us this unsearchable spiritual wealth and it is my privilege to share that with you and have you see something of this. This is not about the preacher and how good the sermon was or is; this about the preacher pointing us to Jesus and how good Jesus is, letting us see something of the great and glorious ways in which Jesus has blessed us and our world.

I have to say that there is something here that I don’t quite understand or grasp and I’m not sure that anyone does. “*His intent...*” (v10f) What is God doing? He is giving a mission to the Church that has a cosmic, universal significance! Jesus stands at centre of God’s plan for the whole universe; not just for my life and yours, not just for the Church across the world, but God has a plan that will affect the whole universe.

The Church has a mission to tell people about Jesus and as we do that, something of this many-sided wisdom of God revealed in the gospel has an impact way beyond our small corner. The world, those in power, rulers and authorities – the Church's very life and our mission will confront them with the gospel that challenges their power and authority.

Jesus called people to follow Him; some of them were fishermen whom he met one day sitting by the lake-side mending their nets. He borrowed their boat for a time and then took them out fishing. After a most amazing catch of fish, Peter felt humble and unworthy: "Go away..." (Luke 5:8) but Jesus had other ideas: "Don't be..." (v10) Catching men: what does that mean? Does it mean going round like the child-catcher in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang? Surely not! Or dragging people to Church rather against their will? Or going round the doors and putting your foot in the door haranguing people about religion? No! No! No! It means telling people the stories of Jesus, telling people what we have discovered for ourselves about life and faith in Christ, what we know and sharing that with our friends and the people we meet in a very simple, straightforward, unashamed way, so that they will know about and understand Jesus and perhaps even believe in Him.

I came across this quote the other day. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who died in a concentration camp during World War 2; he said this about the Church and its preachers: "No man builds the Church, but Christ alone. Whoever is minded to build the Church is surely well on the way to destroying it...We must proclaim, He builds." I feel at the moment in Juniper Green as if God is away ahead of us; He is at work in our community and we are going to have to do some catching up, that we need to run to keep up with what God is doing in the hearts and minds of people around us and we see some of that in our Sunday morning services. Jesus builds His Church; our job is simply to tell people about Him and proclaim good news. This is not just a job for preachers, but for the whole Church; it is for me to preach unsearchable riches here on Sunday and it is for you to share with the people you meet what you know in other ways.

Has the last twenty minutes been what you expected? Better? Worse? Tell me later! Is Church a dry, dusty religious thing to do? Or is this a time to explore the things that make us rich? Is worship something to endure, or a time to enjoy the ways in which God has blessed us? Is this a time to revel in the wealth of God's blessing? Is this a time to (re)discover the glorious things that God has done for us in Jesus? Is this a time to have our eyes opened a little more so that we see something new? Is this a time to discover how rich we are? If we are to be the Church that God wants us to be, a Church engaged in mission, then the first thing we need is a "deeper sense of the unsearchable riches of Christ!" (James S. Stewart) Marvel that God has lavished His love upon you! Revel in fact that we are accepted. Enjoy access to God when pray. Rejoice in His grace, in love that we don't deserve! Are we learning to explore these riches? We should be!