

EPHESIANS 3:1-12
THE GOSPEL FOR EVERYONE

I love a good mystery! Have you played *Cluedo* – the mystery game; Dr Black is the victim of murder and you are a character in the game and there are all kinds of clues that you have to collect as you move from room to room and ask questions of your opponents; the game ends when you have an accusation to make and when you get it right; Miss Scarlett in the library with the lead pipe! Mystery solved; you win! We watch them on TV, or read the book! Who will be the victim? Then you meet all of the characters who will be suspect once the crime has been committed and what motive they have for murder! Then Poirot or Miss Marple or Rebus or DCI Burke comes along and finds the clues and begins to put all of these clues together and finds a suspect and the evidence to prove that the suspect did it! Mystery solved, they win and the culprit goes to jail! Sometimes you pick up the clues as you go along; sometimes the authors throw in some red herrings just to throw the reader off the trail and the ending comes as a bit of a shock!

So a mystery is something you have to work out and try to understand from clues that are presented to you. In Bible times there were all kinds of ‘mystery religions’ which came from Greece, Egypt or Persia; they were all different, but one thing they had in common - they were bit like becoming a member of a secret society whose rites and rituals were not to be divulged to an outsider. If you had the knowledge, knew the mystery, you had knowledge that no-one else had and it was not for sharing; it was for keeping secret. So then, a mystery is something for working out by yourself; you discover the answer and then keep it to yourself!

So, this is what Paul means when he talks about a mystery in Ephesians 3, something that he has worked out and something to keep to himself? Wrong on both counts! The mystery of which Paul speaks is something that God has shown him and is something that he is called to share with others. This is one occasion when the Bible uses a word in a quite different way from the way we use it. In the Bible, a mystery is something new “a truth which was once concealed and beyond human understanding but which has now been revealed by God Himself.” (Light for the Lectionary p14) This mystery is something new, but it is not a secret to be kept; it is good news for spreading and Paul has the enormous privilege of being called by God to spread this good news.

God reveals the mystery: “*Surely you...*” (3:2f) We don’t know how this happened; what was the process by which God revealed this to Paul and the other apostles altogether, but there are some clues and some things we do know. We will come to what the mystery was in moment and it was altogether a new thing for these men to grasp, but there are hints of this mystery already in the Old Testament, places where God had hinted at what was to come in a much bigger, grander and fuller way in Jesus. We also know that Paul spent 3 years preparing for his ministry as an apostle: he went home to Tarsus and spent 3 years there reading his Bible, praying, studying, listening to God; so it would be no surprise then, if this mystery was revealed to Paul as he read, prayed and listened to God during these 3 years. He makes clear, though, that this is not something Paul discovered or made up; this was something that God revealed to him, that the Spirit of God has made known not only to Paul, but to the other apostles as well.

What is the mystery? “*This mystery...*” (3:6) Until Paul’s generation, the promises of God were for Israel only; the grace of God was only for the Jews; only the Jews were members of the family of God, God’s children. The Bible’s world was divided into 2 pieces: the Jews and everyone else. ‘The Gentiles’ is not another racial group

equivalent to the Jews; 'the Gentiles' is simply everyone else except the Jews; the world was made up of the Jews and everyone else (and everyone else equals the Gentiles) The Jews thought that the promises of God belonged exclusively to them; only they were blessed by God; God's grace was poured out only on them; only the Jews had access to the presence of God. The new thing that Paul and the others had discovered was that now the gospel is for everyone; the promises of God belong to believers no matter where they come from. This may not sound much to us, but this was earth-shattering, revolutionary! It went against all that Paul had been brought up to believe.

There had been clues earlier: Isaiah 60 talks about light dawning and the glory of God being revealed in the world in a new way and then: "*nations will...*" "*and all...*" (*Isaiah 60:3,6*) We don't know exactly where Sheba is, though it is probably in Southern Arabia; what is certain is that it was foreign and yet here are people coming from nations beyond Israel to worship God. Most of all, we see that in the story of the wise men coming to worship the new-born king, Jesus; it may have been up to 2 years after He was born, but these wise men came bringing their worship, their gifts to King. I heard a story the other day from China, that 2000 years ago a new star appeared and it was called the King's Star; also the chief astronomer in China went walkabout for 2 years and no-one knows where he went; perhaps he was one of the wise men. I love the notion that some might have come from China and picked up others along the way so that by the time they reached Bethlehem there might have been far more than three of them and they had come from all kinds of nations to the East of Israel.

The gospel is for everyone. That is the mystery that God has revealed to Paul; anyone can come to Jesus and find Him to be the Saviour. "*in Him...*" (3:12) No matter who you are and where you come from, you have free access to God through Jesus. Here are the promises that God makes: to be with His people always and everywhere, to forgive our sins, to be our help and strength, to bless us, to hear our prayers, to love us endlessly – all of these promises are for all who come to Jesus. Everyone who comes to Jesus, no matter their history, their country of origin, their family background, their colour, the place they stay – we all have free access, confident access to God and His grace and His promises. That is the gospel.

Glory of the gospel and the Church is that no matter who we are we come to God in exactly the same way. If you've been here every week for decades, or if this is first time in Church ever, know this – we all come to God in the same way, through Jesus. Whether we're from Scotland, Nigeria, USA, Cambodia, Australia, whatever religious background we have, we all come to God in the same way through Jesus and when we come to Jesus, we share in all the grace, all the promises, all the family blessings of belonging to God. There are no first and second class citizens in God's family; there is no hierarchy of believers that says one is better than the other; what unites all of us most completely is that "*in him...*" (3:12)

The Mystery is for sharing: "*I became...*" (3:7-9) Paul's calling from God is to declare the good news, to tell people what he now knows. So, he spent the rest of his life travelling the world telling people about Jesus, telling people what God had done through Jesus. He went to Jewish synagogues to tell Jews about Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord and some Jews believed; he went to the town centres in other European towns of the Roman Empire and told the crowds there about Jesus and some of them believed in Jesus as Saviour; he went to people's homes and told them and their families and friends about Jesus and some believed in Him and so the gospel spread and people all over the world came to know, understand and believe the gospel. All because God called Paul to declare what he knew.

People have said to me as preacher 'how do you have something new every week? Surely you just go back over things again and again!' I have been a preacher now for nearly 30 years and you know my biggest fear – there will be things that I don't have chance to preach. The "unsearchable riches of Christ" is Paul's way of describing the gospel. On the one hand, the gospel is so simple – "*believe in Lord Jesus and you will be saved*" and it's easy; on the other hand there are depths to this gospel that I will never understand, let alone be able to explain; it is huge, enormous, unsearchable, so that there is always something new to discover. I well remember Wm Still, one-time minister of Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen and by this time he'd be in his 70's, reading a Bible passage and stopping as he read it to say 'I've never noticed that before'; there are still new depths for me to discover and to preach; there is far more in the Bible than any preacher has time to declare.

But this is not just for preachers to share; this is for the whole church. How will the world know anything of this gospel? Only by the Church telling them. There is no divine advertising plan that writes messages in the sky like some God-given aeroplane; the world will only know about Jesus when the Church tells it. There is even a hint here that the angels will only find out the gospel through the Church! Our friends will only know about Jesus as and when we tell them, or someone tells them. The people we live beside will only know about Jesus if someone tells them. The people we meet at work will only know gospel when someone like us tells them. The people we go to school with will only know the gospel as and when we tell them. There is no other strategy in God's mind; the world will know the unsearchable riches of Christ through the Church, as we tell them. This is not about preaching sermons on street corners or in your living room, or the office, but is about taking the opportunities that arise and explaining what we know simply, clearly, unashamedly. Equally we can't say about some people or groups 'I'll not tell them; this is not for them' because no-one is to be excluded; not all will believe, but all must hear; and so everyone in our community, no matter who they are, gets a Christmas card from the Church.

This is glorious. No matter who we are, we come to God in the same way, through Jesus and for faith. We all share in the same promises; are all part of the same family and we are part of this together with Christians all over the world. When you talk to someone after the service, over coffee, you and they together come to God in the same way, through the same Jesus. We tell that story to our world, our community, to people we know and there is no other story to tell; there is no other way for them to come, no extra qualification they need to have, no hoops through which they have to jump, but they come in the same way as we do, and the same gospel is for them. We have a story to tell, a story of peace and hope, of love and grace, forgiveness and blessing; it is the story of Jesus, His birth, life, death and resurrection, and it is a life-giving story; don't keep it to yourself, share it with someone this week as opportunity arises. "*in him...*" (3:12)