

Reflection for Pentecost 7 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

One television programme that Rebecca and I enjoy watching is Grand Designs as it follows folk taking an empty plot of land or some old run-down building and transforming it through the design, planning and hard work, creating in the end buildings that are sometimes beautiful and always interesting. Yet, so often, as things unfold all does not quite go as anticipated, with many twists and turns along the way before completion, the whole project being presented in just one hour. Some of you may have experienced just such a project in your lives and can relate. We can!

The opening part of St Paul's letter to the Ephesians is not dissimilar. Not about a grand house design, rather a celebration of God's eternal plan and how it is brought to fulfillment. A wonderful and beautiful passage.

As one commentator has put it "This is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. It is unlike anything else in the Pauline letters. In the Greek it can be punctuated as a single sentence. The repetition of key words, the piling up of phrases, and the circling round and steady enrichment of the central theme gives it a depth and resonance unsurpassed in Christian praise. It is a word to return to, to rest upon, to rejoice in, and not least, to enjoy. It should have been put to great music long before now."

Personally, I must admit that, I am glad that the English translation is broken up into sentences and punctuated. Reading it as one sentence would be just too much!

As St Paul begins, he reaches back to the beginning of time and says that each one of us was chosen by God 'before the foundation of the world' He conveys something of the mystery of God, revealed in and through Christ "he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ." Then he looks forward towards the end of time and the fulfillment of God's plan. "As a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." At the very heart of this lies Christ binding everything together and bring it to fulfillment: "this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory."

What we see here, in Paul's enthusiasm, is God's overarching plan, his hand in control from the first to the very last - touching you and me at the very heart.

It is almost too much to take in, so let us focus on one or two of the phrases.

"He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."

We live in a world that is so often focused on the individual. Here, though, the opposite is highlighted. Paul reminds us very clearly that before we were even conceived; even before the beginning of the world God had chosen us. What we see here is God's love for us at its most clear and intense. It is all about what God has done for us – not what we have achieved. To use Pauline terminology, we are justified by faith and not by

our actions. Or think of the word “grace” which sums it up – “A free and undeserved gift”. The gift of God’s love, that jumps from this passage.

“He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.”

Think of the word “adoption” and its meaning – “To take on the legal responsibilities as parent of - a child that is not one’s biological child.” Now place it in the in context of Paul’s passage. He is talking about us - you and me - as the recipient of adoption, with God as the parent - the one who takes legal responsibility; not because we deserve it, but because he loves each one of us.

The result is that we can call him father: as the Lord’s prayer puts it, “Our father which art in heaven”, we become part of the family of God, not just in temporary way (fostering) but in a permanent way. We belong: we have a place at the family table.

Think of that passage which we read a few weeks ago from Mark 3

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” In some Bibles that passage is entitled “The True Kindred of Jesus”; a reminder that, by adoption, we are all part of Jesus’ family - all part of God’s family the church.

Thirdly, Paul says this: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.” This phrase is in many ways a sub-section and develops the end of verse 6 “freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” It is a reminder that, in our union with Christ, we already participate in the benefits of the future redemption of the world from evil which God assured through Christ’s death.

The particular benefit Paul singles out here for special mention is that of forgiveness of sins — sins that separate us from God, and not just God, but also those around us. By the grace of forgiveness, we can begin to grow and develop into the people God our father wants us to be. As reconciliation becomes a reality in our lives and in our church communities, so does spiritual wisdom and understanding – we become the family of God visible to the world.

This wonderful passage encapsulates so much of what the Christian faith is about and the hand of God at work. I would encourage each of you read it again and reflect upon it. It is Paul at his most profound as he sums up what it means to be Christian and live the life of faith.