

### **Introduction**

There is a story of a young African woman called Naomi who started a small dressmaking business. She was skilled with her hands and had an eye for colour and pattern. Now she realized she could turn these abilities into good use. Not only to make clothes for herself and her family but to earn some money to supplement the family income. The brightly coloured fabrics of her part of Africa were popular, not only in the local district but also, she's heard in other countries as well. Who could tell where it all might lead.

She employed two local women to help with the dressmaking, and a young man who would travel to the city to buy supplies and sell the finished products. Together they worked hard and had a measure of success. People liked what they did and they were reliable. Soon they had more orders than they could easily complete. So she hired two more workers to enable that they kept up with demand.

The little group worked together happily until one day one of the younger women said, "You know I wonder if we could make other things beside dresses? Curtains? Covers for chairs? Things like that".

The others agreed enthusiastically. They were good at dressmaking but were ready for new challenges. Naomi smiled. At last the moment had come.

She went to her desk; to the drawer she had always kept locked. She took out a plain sealed envelope with a date written across the seal. The date was the day she started the business. She handed it to the young woman. "Go on open it". She said.

The young woman opened it and found a single sheet of typed paper. She read out what it said. It contained a plan for a larger business that would make the wonderful fabrics into all sorts of things that people might want in their homes.

Naomi told them, "I've kept it secret from you all this time. I knew that if I told you you'd say I was daydreaming and then you'd have started daydreaming yourselves. We had to prove we could make dresses first. But now I've shared the secret with you. That's what I planned all along let's do it. And the young man, sitting in the corner and listening to it all suddenly realized that his job was going to change drastically and forever.

In the reading from Ephesians Paul draws a picture of God which is a bit like the picture of Naomi. And Paul sees himself as we may imagine that young man saw himself. Suddenly he has been let in on an extraordinary

**Ephesians 3:1-12****Matthew 2:1-12**

secret. What might have looked like a strange innovation was what God had in mind all along.

God, it seems, had drawn up a blueprint for his worldwide family right from the beginning. He had hinted that there were developments yet to come –perhaps most strongly in the Prophets, particularly Isaiah – but most of his people thought that their present calling, to be his holy people and keep his law would remain central. Now, however, he is letting them in on the secret that had lain hidden for ages and generations.

Often when we think about Epiphany our focus is on the distance the wise men travelled to mark the birth of Jesus, we think about the significance and symbolism of the presents that they brought for the baby. Presents that pointed to Jesus' own calling and ministry. But the astonishing significance of Epiphany is that people of other faiths came to worship Jesus. These were wise men, scholars who were looking for the coming of the promised King. But they weren't Jews. They were Gentiles.

If you look up the word Epiphany in a dictionary you will see it has two meanings:

The manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi and

A moment of great revelation or realization

For the Jews this was a moment of great revelation. They realized that although God had called them apart to be his special people and to work out the salvation that God offered them his main purpose was to offer that salvation to the whole world. They were not special in God's sight but they were called, not to separate themselves from the other nations of the world who they looked down, on but they were to be God's ambassadors to those nations. Their job was to tell the world about Jesus.

Paul uses eager excited language in verse 6 to describe just how great the privileges are that are now open to the Gentiles. First they are to share the inheritance. Fancy hearing the news that a family down the street has come into a large and wealthy inheritance – and then being told that you are to become full members of that family with instant privileges identical to theirs. That is the situation the Christian Gentiles now find themselves in. God has promised his people, Israel, that they will inherit the world, when God renews the whole creation his people will be Kings and Lords over it. Now Gentiles are to share in this inheritance.

Second, they are to become fellow members of one body. Paul probably still has in mind the image of the church as 'the body of Christ'. Gentile Christians aren't going to simply be second class citizens. They are to be

**Ephesians 3:1-12****Matthew 2:1-12**

the limbs and organs of the Messiah's body just as the Jewish Christians are.

Thirdly, they are to have an equal share in the promises. All God's promises have been made to Abraham and his family now that family is going to be a worldwide company. And of course that means you and I are part of that company. Without God's secret master plan the salvation offered by Jesus would only be for a small nation in the Middle East. God's vision was that Jesus' death on the cross was for the whole of humanity throughout all time.

This is the most wonderful message for us all and it became Paul's life work to spread that message throughout the known world and beyond as he wrote it down for us to read and understand hundreds of years later.

The church is the body of Christ and through the church God's wisdom and purpose is to be made known to mankind and to the heavenly powers.

But what does that mean? The basic thought of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is that as it stands, this world is in complete disunity. There is disunity between Jew and Gentile, between Greek and Barbarian; there is disunity between different people within the same nation; there is disunity within every individual, for in every person good struggles with evil; there is disunity between mankind and the animals and above all there is disunity between mankind and God. This is clearly seen every day as we listen to the news and hear accounts of conflict between the America and China, Jews and Palestinians, between Syrians and Islamic State, Between the Taliban and the rest of the world and between individuals in their relationships and family life.

Paul's understanding is that Jesus died to bring all the discordant elements in this universe into one, to wipe out the separations, to reconcile people to each other and to reconcile people to God. Jesus Christ was, above all things, God's instrument of reconciliation. It was to bring all things and all people into one family that Jesus died. But clearly that unity doesn't yet exist. We only have to look around us to see that. The unity has to be brought about. Thinking about our battle with Covid. Teams of doctors immediately started looking for a vaccine that would help protect us against this deadly virus. It was such a joyous moment when we heard that scientists had been successful and found not one but two or three vaccines that would protect us. Once the vaccine was made it was there but before it could become available to people so that they could be protected it needed to be taken out from the laboratory into the world. Doctors had to be taught about it and how to use it. The answer

**Ephesians 3:1-12****Matthew 2:1-12**

is there but one person cannot take it out into the whole world. A corps of doctors must be the agents by whom it is taken to all those who are vulnerable to Covid 19

That is what the church is to Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus that all people and all nations can become one; but before that can happen they must know about Jesus Christ ~ and it is the job of the church to make him known. Christ is the head: the church is the body. The head must have a body through which it can work. The church is quite literally hands to do Christ's work, feet to run his errands, a voice to speak his words. The bringing of all mankind into God's love was part of his eternal plan and it was also his plan that he was going to use the church, his people, to do it. It is as barriers are broken down between individuals and as they become God's family, his body here on earth, that the message of his healing, reconciling love is made known.

In this letter Paul puts forward a vision of the new society that God is forming ~ his church. This new society is God's family, his dwelling place and his instrument in the world. We talk about ourselves as the 'church family' and that is what God intends us to be. Paul describes us as members of God's household. God is our father, it is from him that his whole family in heaven and on earth get their name and it is he who shows us the model of what a father should be. When Jesus died for us on the cross he not only removed the barriers that separated us from God but actually changed our status. We became God's children and therefore members of his family; sometime quite a mismatched and discordant family.

That is why Paul prays so urgently for the Ephesian Christians and for us. We have been adopted as God's children and are part of his family but it is only as he lives in us through his Holy Spirit that we are going to change into the loving united people that he has called us to be. And it is only when we are able to share that love and compassion with each other that we will be able to take the message of God's transforming love out into the world.