

Introduction

This week I have been discussing hope with the children at Thriplow school. It was interesting to hear their answers which were a mixture of the 'Big answers' like 'I hope that the wars will stop' and 'that children won't go hungry'; and the smaller answers of immediate impact like, 'I hope I can sleep well tonight' or 'I hope I get a puppy for Christmas. There is something exciting about articulating our hopes and dreams and sharing them with others – though it also makes us vulnerable and exposes our inner dreams

In some ways this is a similar process to prayer. As we pray we bring our needs, our hopes and dreams to our heavenly father and wait expectantly to see our requests fulfilled. It is more focused than simply sharing with someone else what we hope for. St Paul was single minded in his prayers. He consistently and persistently prayed for the Christians in the churches he had planted and he was always clear and focused about what they needed most. He always started by thanking God for all that he had already done and then moved on to ask him for other things. So here in his letter to the church family in Ephesus he both praises God that through Jesus Christ he has given them every spiritual blessing and asks that they would know the fullness of what he has given them. Paul's prayer was that they should appreciate to the fullest extent the implications of the blessing that they had already received from God.

God has done so much for us. Through Christ we have been made God's children, released from being bound by sin and failure and promised an eternal inheritance

in heaven. This is a gift that has been given to us already and if you like is simply waiting for us to unwrap it and claim it for ourselves. Paul's prayer is that we might know and claim for ourselves everything that Jesus Christ has won for us. He wants us to open all the gifts offered to us and not leave any hidden or unexplored.

This knowledge isn't something we will be able to gain on our own. Knowledge of God comes as he makes himself known to us and so Paul asks that God will give to his people the Spirit of wisdom and revelation and that he will literally open the eyes of their hearts and there are four specific things that Paul wants the Christians at Ephesus to know:

1. God himself
2. the hope to which he has called them
3. the riches that they will inherit in the time to come
4. and his incomparably great power which is available to those who believe in him.

Ephesians 1: 11-end

Matthew 25:31-end

1) The first and most important thing that we need to know as Christians is God himself

Of course this involves knowing about him and we learn that through observing the world he has made which shows us so much of God's character in its design and the way it works, through reading his word the Bible which teaches us about him and the way he acts and about his nature, through Jesus Christ who reveals God's character to us most clearly. Yet all of these ways of knowing God are similar to reading a biography about someone. It tells us all the information about them and their achievements but it doesn't help

us to know them in the same way we would if we sat down with them and chatted to them. It certainly doesn't help us to know them personally and individually. For that we need to meet the person in the flesh and spend time with them. So Paul's prayer for the Christians in Ephesus is that God will pour his Spirit upon them so that they may meet with him personally and come to know him on a deeply personal and intimate level. This is a prayer we can make our own. It is God's greatest wish that every human being should know him on an intimate and deeply personal level and that we should fully understand everything that belongs to us by right as his children.

2. This is what Paul calls the hope to which God has called us.

Which raises the question, "What did God call us for?" His call was not a random or purposeless thing. He had some object in view when he called us. He called us to something and for something, and this is what Paul means by the hope that we have been called to. The New Testament tells us that this hope we have as Christians is a rich and varied expectation. God has called us to belong to Jesus Christ and into a deep fellowship with him. He has called us into a holy calling, since he who has called us is holy himself and says to us 'you shall be holy, for I am holy'. One of the characteristics of the holy or special people of God is our release from the judgement of God's law which judges us because we fall so far short of it. As God's children we are called into freedom and released from the things that bind us such as past hurts and failures, our own expectations of what we should be.

Another characteristic is harmonious fellowship across the barriers of race, class, sex and status. We were called in the one body to enjoy the peace of Christ and must live lives worthy of that calling both as individuals and as a church family.

Ephesians 1: 11-end

Matthew 25:31-end

3. Paul also prays that they will know the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints.

God's calling of us points back to the beginning of our Christian lives when we first heard him calling to us and reaching out to us, when we started to get to know him personally. God's inheritance points on to its end, to that final inheritance of which God's Holy Spirit is the guarantee and which Peter describes as 'imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you'. For God's children are God's heirs, in fact fellow heirs with Christ', and one day by his loving goodness the inheritance will be ours. Exactly what it will be like is beyond our ability to imagine but certain aspects of it are described for us in the New Testament. We are told that we shall 'see' God and his Christ, and worship him; that this beatific vision will be a transforming vision, because 'when he appears we shall be like him not only in body but in character as well and that we shall enjoy perfect fellowship with each other. For God's inheritance (the inheritance he gives us) will not be a little private party for each individual but rather a huge party among the saints as we join that great multitude described in the book of revelation as being 'a multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues standing before the throne and before the lamb.'

Paul does not think it presumptuous that we should think about our heavenly inheritance or even anticipate it. On the contrary, he prays that we may 'know it', the 'glory' of it, indeed 'the riches of the glory of it.

4. Paul's final request is that they should know God's incomparably great power for those who believe.

If God's call looks back to the beginning of our relationship with him and God's inheritance looks on to the end, then surely God's power covers the period in between. This life we live on earth. It is only through God's power that we can live as he has called us to. Paul talks of it as being 'the immeasurable greatness of God's power' This is the never failing supplies of his power that are available to us as his Children. It is his great might which enables us to do difficult things and face trying situations. The power that Paul talks of is not like an engine pulling or pushing a load along. It is an 'inner strength'. The word Paul uses is the root of our English word 'energy'. It means 'inworking'. Paul is saying that, if we believe, if we let God live and rule in our lives, he will work in us, energise us and give us inner supplies of power.

On Friday I came home from visiting my mother. Many of the houses in the roads near her already had their Christmas decorations up and as it was early evening I drove through a fairyland of twinkling lights and shining stars. It was beautiful and lifted my heart. There was something

Ephesians 1: 11-end

Matthew 25:31-end

beautiful and lovely about it. When I had passed that way earlier in the day the power had been turned off and the

decorations looked drab and uninviting and in fact were almost unnoticeable. All that could be seen were wires and shapes covered in tinsel looking drab and uninspiring. The decorations were exactly the same as they were in the evening but the power that gave them life and beauty was missing.

It is the same for us as Christians with God's power at work within us we are transformed into something beautiful and vital. We are able to live as he wants us to and we are filled with his love and his essence. If we don't allow that power to fill us, and it isn't an automatic thing, we have to let God fill us with his Spirit, we are simply drab and unattractive and not living any way up to our full potential.

I don't know if you have ever walked along the high street at night when the outside lighting on the church is off. But the church is empty and dark. It is a dismal sight. The building is a shell with no life and is not very attractive. When it is lit up and all the lights are on it is transformed. It becomes something different, a beautiful alive and vibrant place. I think that often we as individuals and as a church family have our power turned down to a minimum. The dimmer switch is on and it's almost as if we are on a trickle charge rather than receiving a full supply.

Paul describes God's power as being incomparably great for those of us who believe and describes its magnitude as being the same power that raised Christ from the dead. God's unlimited strength and energy is at our disposal as his children and Paul's prayer and

longing is that we should know and experience that power to the full. That is my prayer and longing for us as God's people here in our four parishes (and my prayer for Beatrix as she begins her Christian journey). All his resources are open to us. Why are we content to be dim and dingy, a shadow of the beautiful people that we can be? God wants to light us up and to fill us with his power. He wants us to know him fully and experience the depths of his love for us and to be certain of the hope that he has called us to.

I'd like us to take a moment or two to stop and consider what it is that is stopping us knowing that power transforming our lives.

Readings**Knowing God and his power in us****Foxton/Fowlmere****Ephesians 1: 11-end****Matthew 25:31-end**

Invite people to say amen to the prayer if they would like to know God better and experience his incomparably great power at work in their lives.

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, the source of all power, may we in our weakness receive in us the promised power of your Holy Spirit, the power of Christ and his resurrection. So may we never be ashamed of your name, may we never fail through fear, nor turn aside from the life of love and service to which you have called us in Jesus our Lord. Amen.