

Good morning.....these last few weeks we've been journeying through the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul alludes to the idea of the 'mystery' of God and now we get to chapter 3 where he spells that out for us. But before we start I just want to acknowledge that some of the thoughts and structure I'm using this morning come from an American pastor Skye Jethani.

Let's read from verse 2 – For surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation... a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed...that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.

‘Mystery’ is a key word and we need to bear in mind that the English and Greek words don’t have the same meaning. In English a mystery is something, dark, obscure, secret and puzzling. The Greek word mysterion is different. Although still a ‘secret’ it is no longer closely guarded but open. Originally the greek word referred to a truth into which someone had been initiated. So mystery in this sense is a truth which was previously hidden from human knowledge or understanding but now has been disclosed by the revelation of God.

This mystery is that God has had a secret plan for all of history that he has kept hidden. No one has really understood or seen it, but now it has been revealed in Christ. It’s in Ephesians, that Paul begins to unpack this mystery to us. To keep it simple – there are essentially two parts to this mystery.

This first part is that God has chosen to reconcile us to himself.

Through our own sin we were distanced from God, but now, through His grace and the sacrifice of Christ we’ve been reconciled to him.

Paul tells us that this is God’s intent – that God has and has always had a plan, and this is not some spontaneous reaction on his part to

our mess. We are saved by grace through faith, as a free gift, so that we can be united with God for all eternity.

The second part of the mystery is that through the cross, God has done something else which no one would have thought possible - he has made a new humanity. Paul specifically refers to, and Stu taught us about this last week, that God has torn down the wall of division and hostility that existed between the Jews – God’s chosen people – and the Gentiles – who the Jews literally referred to as dogs. In the ancient world in which Paul lived there were only two types of people – Jews and the rest, and God has torn down the mountainous wall that existed between the two groups and made them into one new humanity, reconciling them both to himself.

This was a new and startling revelation. You see although the Old Testament did reveal that God had a purpose for the Gentiles; what the extent of that was, wasn’t clear. Jesus also spoke of the inclusion of the Gentiles and commissioned his followers to go and make them his disciples.

But what neither the OT or Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God’s plan which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under

God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be 'the body of Christ', and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms without any distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new. This was the beginning of God's new creation and ironically it was revealed to Paul.

God has a quirky sense of humour doesn't he? Here he is revealing his new creation - this amazingly radical plan to unite Jews and Gentiles – all peoples - together as one body of humanity in Christ, to Paul – the staunchest of Jews prior to his radical conversion, persecutor of the new Christian church and its followers. Of course, Paul's incredible change of heart and radical change of life that followed, was the reason he was in prison – after his conversion he began to teach that Gentiles had the same access to God that Jews did. If he had been content to be a Jewish Christian with a mission to Jews or if he had been willing to keep Gentiles on a lower plan, he wouldn't have been in jail. It was fanatical Jewish opposition to his message of equality that landed Paul in prison.

To sum up then, the mystery of Christ is the complete union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through the union of both with Christ. It is this double union, individually with Christ and together with each other, the beginning of God's new creation, which was the substance of the mystery, and it is a stunning revelation.

Let's move on to verse 8: Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Phew – Paul was really in to long and complicated sentences – in fact our bible breaks the passage down into manageable portions – the original text of the first half of chapter 3 was just 2 sentences! So let's break it down even further: Paul is saying 1. God has had this hidden plan for all of eternity, 2. the plan has now been fully revealed in Christ, 3. God wants to reconcile us to himself through the death and resurrection of Christ, 4. he wants to create for himself a new humanity – a new people that transcend all the divisions and evils of this world (we'll come back to that one), 5. this new community of

people is called the Church, and 6. God has taken this new community, the Church, and he has put it on display for all to see.

Easy really isn't it – just 6 quite distinct thoughts within the one sentence!

Now we've been through points 1- 4 in great detail over the last 4 weeks – they are made here simply as a bit of a recap – its at point number 5 that I really want to jump in today.

It's here that Paul introduces God's plan for what the church really is. Understanding what the church is, is really important. Contrary to the way we often refer to it today, the church is not a building, it's not an event and it's not a gathering on Sunday. It is simply a community of people – no building, no property, no structure – but a community of people bound together as family by the gospel.

Understandably we often look at the church from only a human perspective. What Paul does here is raise us up and help us see the church from a much, much higher altitude, to change our perspective. Why do you think Christians have gathered on Sunday mornings for over 2000 years now? When you woke up this morning

and it was cold (and dark for our 7.30 attenders!), and you didn't want to get out of bed did you think you should just sleep in and stay put; when you saw that it was a going to be a lovely sunny winter's day did you think oh why bother today, we'll spend the day enjoying the sunshine instead? So why do we do it – why do we forgo the sleep ins and leisure time to come together? From our human point of view we might say, we gather to learn, to hear God's word, to grow in our faith, to worship, for friendship and support, or because we're rostered on to serve.

All of these are true, and they are all good, honourable things. But when you understand what Paul is saying here about the church, it takes on a whole new perspective. Let's read it again:

'so that through the church the wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places'.

In Paul's cosmology there are unseen forces in the world. He calls them rulers and authorities (or powers and authorities) and he uses this language not just here but repeatedly in his letters. These are the forces that are aligned against God and his purposes – the forces which are behind all that is broken and wrong in the world. Hatred,

racism, division, anger, strife, war, disease, and death itself are all being worked by these evil rulers, powers and authorities in the heavenly realm.

It's clear to me that Paul believed in evil. The question is – do we? I suspect the whole notion of evil powers and authorities in the heavenly realms is something we shy away from even thinking about let alone naming. It seems like such an ancient idea in our sophisticated world and yet I believe that the reality of evil is something we need to pay more, rather than less attention to. If we don't acknowledge it, we will never stand against it. If we don't name it, we will never defeat it. Alexander Solzhenitsyn confronts all of us when he said 'the line dividing good and evil goes right through the heart of every human being'.

There are countless stories from just the last 2 centuries alone with which to argue for the very real presence of evil in our world but in reality I believe you only have to look back to the events of last weekend in Norway when 91 people, mostly teenagers and young adolescents, were ruthlessly slaughtered by a mad man, claiming to be a Christian, because he believed this to be a legitimate protest about the number of Muslim immigrants being settled in Europe.

How little things have changed since Paul's days of persecuting and executing those his belief structure did not accommodate.

Post his radical conversion, Paul is saying that not only has God redeemed the previous divisions, the evil, that existed between people through the suffering and resurrection of Christ but more than that, he has chosen to reveal his countercultural and counter-intuitive wisdom of one people through the church. It's as if he puts a spotlight on the church and calls to the heavenly powers and authorities of evil and says 'here – look and you will see that my wisdom has defeated yours.' It's an awesome thought that we the church are the wisdom of God on display for the rulers, powers and authorities of evil. Though they may rule now, their reign will be short. The end for them is sure because Christ engaged with evil to defeat it and that God has chosen the church to bear that truth to all the powers of the heavenly realms.

If you look at the Old Testament book of Job, the story begins with the scene of a courtroom in heaven where God has gathered all the heavenly powers. The Accuser comes into the courtroom after having walked the length and breadth of the earth and finding nothing good there. He reports this to the courtroom, and God says,

Yes, but have you considered my servant Job. God puts the spotlight on Job because in the midst of a world that seems completely corrupt, Job is a righteous man. He represents God's wisdom. God draws the attention of the evil powers in the universe to Job as an example of goodness and righteousness. And that's what Paul says here in Ephesians. The powers and rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms look at this world and say, oh what a mess. And God says, ah yes, but have you considered my church?

The church as God designed it and as Paul described it, the church at its best displays a wisdom that is not of this world. Rather it is a wisdom that says that people are made alive and reconciled to God and to each other through the death of Christ on the cross. It's a wisdom that says that all the division in this world, all the hatred that exists, all the injustice and inequality has been overcome because of God's new creation; his new humanity.

And if you think that division, hatred, injustice and inequality is far less than evil I think you're kidding yourself. They are simply the tip of the evil iceberg – you don't have to scratch these things very far to find the evil that lurks beneath them. And if think I'm exaggerating think of the evil that followed tribal difference in Rwanda,

superiority in Nazi Germany, injustice in Cambodia, and division in Bosnia to name just a few. And whilst drought may be the tipping point for the current humanitarian crisis in the horn of Africa, the lack of access to those most in need, the manipulation of food prices and the political ineptitude and lack of will has created famine on an incredible scale. Tell me evil isn't at play there!

So the real reason we come together on Sunday mornings is not for ourselves or even for each other. The reason we come together on Sunday mornings is because when we gather together across socioeconomic barriers, across racial barriers, across age barriers, across denominational barriers, across worship style barriers, across difference barriers of every kind we declare the wisdom of God, not just to each other and to our community, but to the rulers and powers and authorities in the heavenly realms. We declare to evil that God is sovereign and that he has absolute power, justice and mercy.

When we gather around the communion table and eat the bread and drink the wine together, when we come together at the cross as one community we declare that Christ has met evil head on in a final, terrible confrontation but has risen triumphant. He has won the decisive battle once and for all time.

When we love, when we forgive and when we serve, we declare to rulers, powers and authorities that our God reigns. His love, his power and his new reality have broken into this world and will lead us into the next. Although division, injustice, hatred, suffering and death have a foothold now, it's not the last word. Christ and Christ alone has that – he has overcome the grave and his glory fills the highest place. The reign of every other power is finite. His is infinite and eternal.

But yes, although the decisive battle has been won, the final surrender and consummation of the Kingdom of God is yet to come. We live now in the tension between the two kingdoms – we live now between the trees of Jesus' resurrection and his return but it's coming.

It's a bit like the situation in Europe as WW2 drew to a close. The decisive battle with Hitler's army had been fought and won late in 1945 and it was now only a matter of time before the final surrender and the enemy laid down its arms. But on the front line there were a dozen more small but deadly battles and skirmishes to survive before Berlin and the formal surrender. That's how it is for us now in the world. Jesus won the decisive battle on the cross – the end is certain but we are still exposed to final skirmishes of evil and each day we must act both personally and corporately in small and large ways to confront and defeat it.

That's why we gather – that's what the church is! It's not just a group of people coming together for themselves – it's a cosmic community in which the wisdom of God and his new creation is glimpsed and revealed.

Of course, the biggest problem for us today is that the gulf between Paul's description of the church, the church at its best, and our present experience is embarrassingly large.

So what do we do about it? What is it that I think this text has to say to us today? I have 5 thoughts about this:

Value the Treasure

Get to Work

Live the Unity

Make the ideal real

Live with confidence

Let me open up each quickly so that you've got something to take away today.

Value the mystery

Perhaps you might remember that a few weeks ago I said that our treasure lay in knowing who and whose we are. Let me remind you. We are the adopted sons and daughters of the Creator God. God chose us and has given us a identity that we weren't born with, that we didn't earn the right to use, and that brings with it all the benefits of that identity. We don't deserve those benefits, we didn't earn those benefits and yet they are ours as a free gift. Further, that we are joint heirs, not only with Jesus Christ, but also with our brothers and sisters. That's the mystery that Paul explains and that's our treasure.

How well do you understand the mystery? How much do you value it? The value we place on something determines the lengths we are willing to go to for it, the hardships we are willing to endure. We will expend enormous energy and resources to care for a person or a prized possession we value a great deal. Paul valued the treasure enough to go to prison for it. I doubt if we'll be asked to do that but would we? Are we willing to suffer being laughed at, to financially sacrifice into missions and outreach and building the church, to give our time and service? Are we willing to lose our life in order to find it?

To value the treasure is to be responsible for it. We have to care for it, honour it, study it, share it, protect it, hand it on to the next generation, and actually live it.

Get to work

Yes, the mystery says that we are saved by grace not by works but this doesn't mean that we get to be inactive. The grace that's been extended to us is not a 'cheap grace'. It's a grace that moves us to action – it enlists us and empowers us and we are to become givers of it. Yes it's a free gift from God but just as with all his gifts, its designed to overflow from us to other people.

Klyne Snodgrass says that ‘grace engages us, calls us, pushes us, develops us, and gives us a ministry.’ So often we think of ministry or service as our gift to God but that’s actually rubbish; ministry is God’s gift to us! It’s the free flow of grace from God through us to other people.

Live the Unity

We’ll spend a lot of time talking about this when we get to the second half of Ephesians but suffice to say now that whilst God places incredible emphasis on unity, right through history the church has failed spectacularly in precisely this area. We, and generations of Christians before us, know far more about division than unity. But we know what is required – we are to live unity. That doesn’t mean that we will like other Christians, be like them, or even agree with them, but we are to recognize that we are one with them and share the same Lord and the same inheritance. Unity is not an afterthought or a non essential – it’s at the very heart of the mystery.

What does that mean for us here at Newlife ?– the attitude we have toward others is foundational. Christianity is communal – not just me and Jesus but me and you and Jesus! The way we speak to each

other, the way we include others, our attitude to newcomers, our attitude to those who are different to us in appearance, race, culture, socio economic status, spiritual experience, tradition – there is simply to be no division, no snobbery, no superiority, and no exclusivity. By our very presence together we protest the divisions that exist and we stand against them.

Make the ideal real

Paul didn't live in a dream world – he was very well aware of the failures of even his own churches – but it didn't stop him presenting the ideal. For Paul, the ideal he described was the real. It was what God had established. The truth is that we have been raised with Christ and made one. The truth is that Christ has won the decisive battle. That evil exists is a distortion of that truth.

For most of us church is a place that we think is for us. We go to church to see what we can get and it has to suit us. Outside of here the church is viewed as irrelevant, ineffective and out of step with where the real world is really at.

Somehow we've got to move past this and as Paul did, recognise that church is the place where God's purposes are alive and the unity God seeks is practiced and that it happens so incredibly that all the

powers and rulers and authorities of the heavenly realms stand up and take notice. Church is a proto type of God's end – time and eternal community and a witness to the powers that oppose him. The church should scare the living daylights out of the entire cosmos and we have to start believing in and living the ideal!

In today's newsletter you'll find a brief report from Dina, our missionary in Bosnia, about the recent kid's camp she provides leadership for. Dina's work exemplifies the church at its best. You see Bosnia is a country that has been deeply divided for centuries not only because of religious difference – Muslim against Christian – but also because of Christian difference – Croat Catholic against Serbian Orthodox. What began with Orthodox Christian Serbs waging a campaign of brutal ethnic cleansing against the Muslims in the most recent war during the 1990's, rapidly became Serb against Croat, Croat against Serb, Serb and Croat together against Muslim and so on. The fracture lines remain today and it is into this division that Dina and her tiny evangelical church speak. There are less than 1000 evangelicals across the entire nation of Bosnia, but everytime they gather together in their tiny groups of 20 or 30 or even smaller, they declare that in Christ no division remains. They stand against the evil and destruction wrought by partition and separation, and

proclaim the truth that causes rulers and powers and authorities of evil to know they have been defeated. When orthodox and catholic and muslim born children learn to play together and understand they are one in Jesus, Dina's greatest hope and prayer is that they will learn to live together too and that her country's future may be astonishingly different to its past as a result. Many would say it's a ridiculously big, audacious dream but Dina would say it's a reality in Christ, simply waiting to be claimed, simply waiting to be lived.

I'm so grateful to know Dina. I'm so grateful we get to partner with her in the bold and audacious reality that she aspires to for her country. I'm so grateful for her example and witness and faith! She knows what the church really is and we need to follow her example and make the ideal real in our own situation.

Live with Confidence

The last 2 verses of our passage today read like this: In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Life as we know it is difficult. Suffering, evil, and death do surround us and it's easy to become discouraged and think things are hopeless.

In the face of this, how can we live confidently?

Paul had a front row seat to personal difficulty and was still confident. He stared clearly into the eye of evil and knew that it was not ultimate. You see, the assurance of God's future can bring hope whatever our and our world's circumstances. Without wanting to diminish in any way the hardships that some of us endure, we can have hope and optimism and courage because God's future triumph is already determined. No matter how bad our present circumstances are they are not the end of the story. Evil has not and will not win. We know how it will all end – Jesus has won the decisive battle and the final battle will be his too – he is coming back again.

God's future is already true – his wisdom and his kingdom has broken in - we need to proclaim it and live it.

