

Sermon

Losing something we really love can be a heartbreaking experience. But if we get lost ourselves, or if we lose – even for a short time – someone we love then that is often not only sad but deeply traumatic. It's something most of us will have experienced in some way.

I remember when our daughter Debbie was only 4 or 5 years old. We were in Hyde Park in London with some friends. We gave Debbie some money for an ice cream and watched her go off on her great adventure to buy an ice cream from the van, clearly visible across the grass about a hundred metres away. We watched as she bought her ice cream and then turned to come back to us. At that moment a large crowd of tourists finished their picnic and moved across the grass between us. Debbie was blocked from our view as she was caught up with all these adults. We ran to find her, but already she'd been swept up in this mass of people. For more than ten minutes we searched for her – panicking all the time, before eventually we found her still in this crowd of people hundreds of metres from where she'd been.

In our Gospel reading today we hear how Jesus “saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” The crowd of people was lost: without safety, without guidance, without direction – for where to find food or shelter, without an anchor. He saw that they were without good teaching – so he began to teach them; and they were ill so he began to heal them. Behind all that, they were without the awareness

that God loved them, cared for them and had a purpose for their lives.

The story of the Bible is not a story about power, domination, or conquering. It's not primarily a story about good triumphing over evil. It is a story about lost people, being loved and looked for and found. It's a story about people who once were excluded now being brought home. It's a story about lost people being found.

The theme of the Bible is one of joy as more and more people are looked for, found and then return home.

In the Old Testament days the Israelite people had come to think that they were the only people who could find a home in God. They were wrong and this was pointed out to them on many occasions – but they persisted in their error so much that it became an established way of life; “We are the only people God cares about”, they seemed to say. “God's grace and forgiveness is for the Israelite people alone.” “Only the Israelite people can know God's love and be at home in God.” Saying such as these became the accepted part of how they lived despite God clearly saying to their great ancestor Abraham, “I will bless you, so that you can be a blessing to all the people of the world.” Then much later God said through the great Hebrew prophets like Isaiah that the way in which God had shown love to his chosen people – the Israelites – was to be a pattern to reveal God's love for all people.

So this is where St Paul is coming from in the 3rd chapter of Ephesians. He's coming back to his great theme of God's work of reconciliation – making friends, drawing people in

– that God has made possible and has revealed in a fresh way through Jesus Christ.

He calls it a “mystery”: something hidden for generations but now made known – that God’s love is equally – on equal terms – for Gentile and Jewish people together.

Why a “mystery”?

Paul’s not talking about a story with a baffling plot, or the unraveling of an intricate novel – or anything like that. No! When Paul uses the word “mystery” he means’ that he’s telling people now of something that was always meant to be, but has been hidden or lost or overlooked in the past. A mystery is not something frightening, or the bit-by-bit picking out of a great “who done it”, but rather it is the uncovering of something that has until now been hidden.

What is Paul telling people?

He’s writing to Gentile Christians and telling them in no uncertain terms that God loves them, that they are welcome in his kingdom and that grace, forgiveness and hope are open to them as well.

This may not seem astounding to us – but believe me it was outstanding news in that ancient world.

When St Paul says that he is a prisoner on account of the Gentiles – he is just that. Paul was put in prison by the Jewish people precisely because he insisted on proclaiming God’s love for Gentile people. He was a political prisoner.

The story went like this:

A few years earlier Paul had been going around the churches he had founded in Turkey and Greece making a collection to help the poor and needy Christians and others in Jerusalem. When the collection was complete he’d set off back to Jerusalem and arriving there he’d gone into the Temple area with some other Jews who had accompanied him on his travels. However, some people who saw him in the crowds thought that these travelling companions were Gentiles and not Jewish people and that they had trespassed inside the prohibited area of the Temple. This accusation was untrue. They had seen Paul with Trophimus [from Ephesus] in the city of Jerusalem, but Paul had not taken him into the Temple – even though [as we heard last week] Paul had been preaching that God, through Jesus, had broken down the dividing wall of partition between Jew and Gentile – and all were accepted into God’s family.

The story continues: there was an outcry, Paul was arrested and held captive by the Roman military officers who were responsible for keeping order. When the Commander learnt that Paul was a Roman citizen he allowed Paul to make his defence to the crowd. Paul did this, by telling his own story of how he had been brought up in Jerusalem, how he had learnt the Jewish law at the feet of one of their greatest teachers – Gamaliel; how he had become a Pharisee, how he had then gone on to persecute Christians. Then he told how Jesus had appeared to him on the way to Damascus, and how the eyes of his heart had been opened, and how he responded to God’s call to him to go and spread the message about the resurrection of Jesus with both Jews and Gentiles. It was when he spoke

about his going to the Gentiles that the crowd erupted in fury again and Paul was taken inside a prisoner – for his own protection.

The story continues. Because of the inflammatory stories the Jewish people were making up, Paul could not get a fair trial when he was still in the province of Judea, so he exercised his right as a Roman citizen to be tried in the Imperial court in Rome – he appealed to Caesar – and so it was while being held – awaiting this trial that Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Ephesus.

So when he says that he is a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles it is true!

So what do we take away from all of this?

First, let me go back, just quickly. Right from the very early days the church had responded to something Jesus had said – that the good news of God’s forgiveness and hope – through his death and resurrection – was not to be hidden, but shared with people of all nationalities. They had done this. But the pattern they had before them was this: Gentiles could become Jews – “Proselytes” they were called – and when a Gentile became a Jew he had to go through various stages of initiation and really had to renounce his “Gentile-ness” and become Jewish.

So at the beginning the great debate in the church was, “Since, the Christian faith grew up among Jews in a Jewish community, do Gentiles who want to become Christians have then to become Jews as well?”

Gradually, mainly through Paul’s influence the church said “No”. God accepts all people across the great divides in the ancient world on equal terms: Jews, and Gentiles, slaves and free people, women and men – are all accepted by God and make equal members of God’s family.

So for us today – the mission and ministry of the church in our area is to proclaim this inclusion of all people under the banner of God’s grace, forgiveness and hope.

Paul emphasises this so much. In verse 6 he writes, “*Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*”

In the church people are one. The church has often lost sight of this. We’ve had churches for the aristocracy and churches for the servants: in Singleton and even in Goulburn!

We’ve had people who could rent pews to sit in and exclude others!

Today we are called to look so carefully at our own ways.

How do we exclude people from God’s love, grace and forgiveness? How do we erect barriers that keep people out? What can we do to break them down?

Let me ask you. Do we really believe that God’s love is open to all? Is it really open to the lost people of this world? And if it is, how will that change how we live?