

Sermon

Aim: That people will be enthused by their comprehension of all that God is and has done, that their prayer will be deeper and that they will overflow with God's love.

St Paul is a passionate man. He's certainly an outstanding thinker – but he's also passionate about God's plan, God's love and God's glory. He was passionate enough about God in the days of his ignorance to persecute Christians, and now he's passionate enough about all that God has done in Christ and is doing and plans to do through the Church to fall on his knees before God in gratitude and in intercession.

Jews prayed standing up, lifting up their hands, but Paul prostrates himself – falls down in adoration and in pleading. Paul's passion is the passion of a converted man!

Paul's praise rings out when he thinks about the scope of God's plan – through Jesus Christ – to break down the walls of hostility between people, to create a new humanity reconciled to God and living out that reconciliation.

Paul sees that because Jesus on the cross has broken the power of evil, and God has raised him up in triumph then God's plan is that the Church should be the bearer of that good news, should live it out and should be the sacrament of it, the container of it, and the Church should be a body that creates peace.

That's an exciting mission we have! Hard! Challenging!
But great!

God's Plan

God's Plan has been set out in the past few chapters. Put simply it is this: Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus God is achieving his great work of reconciliation. God is breaking down those barriers of sin and evil that separate men and women from God and then divide them from one another.

By the death of Jesus on the cross and the triumph of his resurrection, God's magnificent grace and forgiveness has been lavished upon all who trust in him. Those who put their faith in Jesus have a new, deeper and richer life – above all a life that is lived in friendship with the God who made them, loves them and cares for them. And more than that – because we are united in Christ, because not only do we share the benefits of his death, but we share also in the power of his glorious resurrection – then we are people who are to live out that reconciliation in our daily lives. For God's love is not simply for a small remnant of faithful people, but for the whole world: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

The church is called to be a prime example of and agent for unity in the world. That was the passion of Jesus. He prayed for the unity of his disciples – and of the church. He taught and lived the example of humility – for self-aggrandisement [the prideful quest for greatness] is the

biggest challenge to unity. In John's Gospel the feeding of the 5,000 is an anticipation of the heavenly banquet where people of all nations were expected to sit down and enjoy the fruits of God's glory.

By his death and resurrection the Lord Jesus Christ did for us something we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot by our own efforts seek to win the favour of God, we cannot work our way into God's good books. We do not have either the strength or the ability. But God offers to each of us his love forgiveness and healing – we are invited to accept it.

We read in Ephesians 2.8-9 those marvellous words “It is by God's loving-kindness and mercy that we are saved – and that comes by trusting in him. It is not as a result of anything we have done or can do. It is all God's work.”

God's love

That people will know God's love more and more is the focus of Paul's prayer. He prays that those to whom he writes will know “how wide, how long, how high and how deep his love really is”. Some people think that Paul is simply indulging in hyperbole – exaggerated speech. But on another occasion he reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God: there is nothing too high, or too low, or too evil or too remote or too threatening – to separate us from God's love.

Here he's praying that Christians will know in their heart of hearts what Paul himself has begun to glimpse that

God's love is wide enough to draw in everyone, long enough to last for all eternity, deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner and high enough to exalt him to heaven. [based on JRWS]. The ancient Christian commentators saw these dimensions illustrated in the cross: its upright pole reaches down into the earth and points up to heaven, while the cross-bar that carries the arms of Jesus reaches out to encompass the whole world.

Do you know God's love like that? Paul wants you to know it more and more – though he warns that you'll never fully understand it. I want you to know it more and more as well. God's love breaks down barriers of prejudice, it cuts through arrogance, it fills us with enthusiasm for life and takes away the fear of dying. I want you to know that God loves you passionately. I want you to trust that love. I want us to live it every day.

God's glory

I think we live in a world where often the magic and passion has gone out of things. We have lost that sense of God's glory. Perhaps we can get it back a little as we watch “Planet Earth” and consider the thousands of species of fish in just one small part of the rivers of the Amazon, or as we observe the marvellous ways of God in the natural world. “All creation praises you” exclaims the Psalmist. Can we not see something of the glory of God?

When Jesus said that “unless we become like children we can never enter the kingdom of God,” was he inviting

us to look again upon the world with the wonder of a child? Did Paul, at his conversion, become blind so that when his sight was restored he could see with new eyes?

St Irenaeus [2nd Century Bishop in France] once wrote, **“The glory of God is a person fully alive.”**

There is a sign that says – “God is Love”. It is the cross – an empty cross. Christians are a Resurrection people; Alleluia is their song!

Bishop Roger Herft tells how his journey in the Christian Way has been one of surprises. From small village churches with mud walls and a thatched roof to glorious cathedrals resplendent with stained glass windows and marble arches, he has been strengthened by the faithful witness of those whose lives have been fashioned by the Christ of the Cross and Resurrection.

Then he tells the story of a young girl who opened his eyes to the glory of God. Kylie was a 9-year-old, a victim of polio that had paralysed her, leaving her on a stretcher-like chair. She attended church regularly and was one of those real encouragers who was able to put people at ease; friendly and engaging. She was a vibrant, dynamic being, full of grace and joy, held in a body that was taut and twisted. One night, just before Easter, Kylie took very ill and within a matter of hours she was dead.

He writes, “Kylie had been prepared to die - for Resurrection had been a part of her everyday life. Her funeral service brought in hundreds of people. Her life had touched so many. Children placed flowers on her coffin as her favourite hymn was sung -

He came singing love,
He lived singing love,
He died singing love,
He rose in silence.
For His love to go on,
We must make it our song,
You and I must be the singers.

We are a Resurrection People whose song is, “Alleluia!”

“The glory of God is a person fully alive.”

To God be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.