

June 14 2009

Sunday 11B (off RCL)

Sermon notes on Ephesians 1.1-2

[Rev Dr Craig Thompson]

Auburn and Kew UCA

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This morning our focus text is a very brief one, and yet one worth pausing to note in itself because it answers questions we need to ask if we're going to take seriously what is to follow: who is it who addresses us here, and with what? Looking to answer these questions, we answer also the question as to what stance we might take in listening to what Paul has to say to the church here. The document itself is a letter, and so it begins in the way a letter would in those times: Paul identifies himself and brings a greeting to his readers. Our interest this morning will be to do with that identification and the greeting. In a way, we will have come to terms with the content of Ephesians if we understand who speaks, and what he brings with him as he comes to us in this writing.

So, first to the "who". This is Paul – simple enough in itself – and yet not only "Paul". Following the name comes what might seem to us a bit like a title: "apostle of Jesus Christ"; certainly, in the abbreviated form "the apostle Paul" we treat his apostleship as something like a title he bears. If "apostle of Jesus Christ" is a "title", like "doctor" or "professor" or "Sir", it is also a *description* of what Paul is. He has not only a "rank" in the church, but a very specific function, to which we'll come in a moment.

But before that there is one other thing to note about Paul's apostleship. For the fact that Paul goes on to say that he is apostle "by the will of God" might find in us cause for concern. People who claim to be what they are, or to do what they do, "by the will of God" can be very dangerous. Among such people are those who strap bombs to themselves and walk into crowded places. "The will of God" is an expression we have come to associate with terror, for good reason.

But let us not be foolish here and, just because God's will and human violence *have* come to be associated with each other, then discard the suggestion that God might indeed, first, *have* a will and, second, that this might be known and impact directly upon the lives of individual people. For the moment let us allow that Paul is, indeed, *commissioned* to do what he does, and does not do it of his own volition. This sets up a

particular type of link between *what* he says, and the fact that *he* says it, for what is said is not from Paul but from God. Again, there is no way to *measure* or to *prove* this. And certainly we'll find reason to question Paul – or God? – in what we hear in Ephesians or other places. But this still won't make go away the problem – or the proposal – that it is *God's* message we encounter here. At this level the best we can do is seek to be charitable in our hearing, and allow that it *might* be God who addresses us here, and ask what that might mean, and what this God might have to say.

One important aspect of being commissioned to do the work of another is that the worker is *disinterested* in the work itself. That is, in the case of our letter, Paul has no personal interest in what is said, or how it is received. He speaks what he hears, and leaves the problem of the content and its reception to the one whose will he obeys: the apostle has the classic "all care, no responsibility" job! Paul is able to do and be and say it all without anxiety as to whether anyone listens. He is, to reduce it to a single idea – *free* as an apostle. His only responsibility is to be what God calls him to be – and that call is that he be the means by which God makes known further the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul does not have to *make* the good news good. If it is good news at all, it is because *God* has made it so; Paul simply, as it were, *reads* the news. And there is, in a sense, a considerable amount of news-reading which takes place in Ephesians.

I began by saying that our opening two verses give us information about who it is who addresses us here, and what it is he will say. While it is Paul who is writing, he does so as "apostle". We've not yet noted that the word "apostle" itself means something like "one who is sent", which reflects the thought that it is "by the will of God" that we come to be hearing from Paul in the first place. God is the active agent, and Paul is the messenger he sends.

So, if that is the "who", what is the message? The answer to this question is given unambiguously in the text itself: the apostle of *this* God is the one who comes bearing "grace and peace":

To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If there is a test to be applied to claims of being sent by God, it is that the apostle is the one who brings the word of grace and peace. Even this, of course, can be corrupted. "Grace" is easily reduced to cheap permission to do as we wish, and "peace" is easily reduced to toleration and the absence of physical violence. But still we must persevere because, however much the ideas might be corruptible, the real question is whether there might really be good news here.

"Grace" is perhaps too religious a word for us to be able to use it meaningfully these days outside the sphere of the church, and it's probably not always that helpfully used within the church, but "peace" is a word on our lips and in our news bulletins day after day. And if our desire for peace is not always explicit, then it is at least implicit in our exhaustion at the demands of life, or anxiety before the ever-impending dooms of this or that social or economic or political or environmental crisis, or our failing health or increasing age or growing responsibilities and burdens. Someone who brings a real word of peace – and not simply a wish for peace – is surely welcome.

But if it is to be a true word of peace, we cannot sever peace it from the word of grace. As much as we have *always* hungered and thirsted for peace, so have we failed to achieve it. Hostilities at the personal and the international level always wax and wane, but they never cease. Only the dead "rest in peace" – but this is scarcely what we long for when we pray for peace. There is no evidence to suggest that peace is something which human beings are able to manufacture for themselves, which is to say that if a real peace were to come, it would have to come from somewhere else, it would have to arise from a place that is not quite *this* place, but which nevertheless "intends" this place – has this place in mind.

It is here that the word of grace makes its peculiar contribution: it is a matter of grace that peace might come. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ": this is to say, "graced peace" to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. "Grace" now really becomes a

verb, the *means* of peace: *given* peace, *gifted* peace.

But, for all of the theological niceness of this idea, how does it become "real"? What does the man or woman of peace look like in a world like ours? The sense of a *lack* of peace arises from the demands which are made upon us. For some these demands are extreme: *change* into something completely different, or even *die*. For most of us, however, they are more moderate but no less incessant. Thinking about this during the week, I looked at my own various "to do" lists, which contribute in no small part to my particular form of being-without-peace. Allowing for a few double-ups between the lists, there was well over 100 phone calls to be made, or emails still to be dealt with, or ideas for mission and ministry to be discussed or explored or enacted, pastoral contacts awaiting attention, unfinished tasks and so on, and of course, in addition, a great number of personal and home-life "to dos" as well. Now, whether or not we *list* the perceived demands on us like that, most of us have that kind of peace-less-ness in one form or another. Just deleting the lists doesn't make the problem go away because, ultimately, the lists which really matter and really demand responses of us relate to *people* who wait on us for this or that thing. Our lack of peace has to do with the demands of other people. Again, only the dead are no longer responsible to the demands of others which such lists reflect. Short of our dying – or those who make demands of us dying or just "going away" – how can we find peace?

The clue is to be found where we started – in the character of Paul's ministry as apostle "by the will of God", for Paul was as much in need of peace as we are today. God commands of Paul that he be an apostle. Yet at the same time, the work of the apostle, while often onerous, is one strangely free of responsibility. We have already noted that Paul's work is to deliver someone else's message of grace and peace. It is not his own grace or peace, but God's; and yet, this is just how it must be, if Paul is himself to have grace and peace.

"Peace" is having a standing before God and the world in which what I must give is met or balanced by what I am given. God meets the demands placed on us, not by doing the stuff we feel bound to do, but by placing a demand of his own, and yet one which he

himself fills. God demands that we be his – that, with Paul himself, we exist and act “through his will”. But by grace God brings the peace that this command is already met in Jesus. And so we *are* his simply because he claims us, and we have only to rest in that relationship, discovering that the thing most earnestly demanded of us is already given to us.

Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, brings just this simple and liberating message: grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the apostle, the good news about Jesus Christ, is aimed at a world longing for peace and yet quite unable to bring it to being. This word offers a new thought about ourselves and about what matters, about where we start and where we end, and about what is demanded of us in the interim.

By the grace of God may that word find open ears among all God's people, that we might indeed know his peace and the rest which comes with it.

Amen.