

June 21 2009

Sunday 12B (off RCL)

Sermon notes on Ephesians 1.3-14

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Some introductory Comments

These twelve verses from Ephesians, while nicely divided up for us in our English Bibles, in fact constitute one long and convoluted sentence in Greek. It is as if Paul made a start in his opening thanksgiving, and felt that he just couldn't stop. He tells here a story – the story of God's dealings with his people – but it is a single story, and not many little stories. He brings to our attention many grand themes. We hear of spiritual blessings, of "predestination", of God's will and purpose, of our adoption as God's children and inheritance from God, of the forgiveness of sins, of the gathering up of all things in Christ, of the praise of God's glory, of the gift of the Holy Spirit, and many other things besides. Each of these could constitute a sermon in itself!

Yet, at the same time, I suggested last week that in the first verses of the epistle we are met with the basic message of the whole letter. We should not let the many themes of our passage today distract us from the heart of the message. We have here not a list of things to believe, but a list of consequences or conclusions from the one thing which is to be believed: that God would bless us beyond our capacity to anticipate or to describe, should the blessing come.

The Sermon

In these quite extraordinary verses, Paul tells the story of the world – our story. As I've already remarked, we could choose any number of things to focus upon in coming to understand what he says here, but will settle for making the first verse our focus, and will draw the other themes of the passage in as means of filling out the sense of "blessing". For Paul, indeed, speaks here of "blessing":

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Throughout this section Paul pushes language to limit, even to the point of over-emphasizing, in order to say what seems to him to be a thing which cannot really be said, and yet *must* be said, even if imperfectly or incompletely. Here, in this first verse of our selection today, the notion of blessing appears three times: "blessed be God...who has blessed us...with every blessing...".

And no *mere* blessing is this, but a blessing which has the character, Paul goes on to say, of our having been chosen (in Christ) "before the foundation of the world". The idea of being "chosen" or, as it appears later in this section, being "destined", is one which is likely to cause some to become a little uneasy, but let's set those anxieties aside for a moment to ask what *Paul* is saying, before we come to what we think about it.

For the force of the language is not in the direction of that type of predestination which counts some in and some out, but rather in the direction of sheer giftedness: if God "elects" his people "before the foundation of the world", then this is something which occurs quite outside of

anything we have done to force God's hand. This idea is reinforced in the references to "adoption" and "inheritance" which come later (vv5, 11): again the point is *blessing* – a thing *given* – a thing which, if not yet *desired*, is nevertheless found to be highly desirable. A child does act to adopt a parent, but vice versa; and we receive an inheritance – at least in the usual way of things – not because of what we have *done* but because of what we *are*.

By pushing the logic of the gospel to its temporal extreme ("before the foundation of the world"), Paul calls for a blessing of God which responds to his having given us what we could not have yet even wanted – for we did not yet exist to want it – and yet which we have found nevertheless to be a thorough-going blessing.¹

Last week, as we reflected on just the first two verses of the letter, we saw that the twin themes of grace and peace were central to the calling of the one who addresses us here, and also to the message he brings. In these twelve verses today we see the theme of grace expounded in language which is both rich with secondary themes, and yet also forced and convoluted as it seeks to demonstrate how closely interwoven are those themes, while at the same time how wide-reaching is the gift which God gives. Here, Paul simply overflows with the gospel.

But, all of that said, it remains the case that here we are also confronted with a question: can we believe it? The point of this question is not can we believe this or that particular thing Paul mentions, whether about our election before the foundation of the world, or the efficacy of the

¹ We might also note here that Paul also forces his thought to the other temporal extreme: God's plan "for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (v.10).

blood of Christ, or that God has a will or purpose for the world. The question is whether we can take to heart that we are caught up in a story like this – that this *is our* story – and one not of our own writing, but one into which we have been written.

Now, occasionally I make references to movies and TV shows in my sermons, most of which I suspect that most of you haven't seen, or would even want to see, but still it seems worthwhile to do that! One fairly recent film which most of you probably haven't have seen, but actually might enjoy, is "Stranger Than Fiction". This is the tale of one Harold Crick, an ordinary kind of chap who, in the course of going about his daily routine, suddenly begins to hear a voice narrating events in his life: perhaps describing the way he brushes his teeth, or the thoughts going through his head as he stands at a corner waiting for the lights to change. As the tale unfolds, Harold begins to suspect that he is in fact a character in someone's novel.

Now, even this news might not be too much of problem, until a day when his watch happens to stop and he resets it by the time given to him by a bystander. At this point he again hears the novelist's narration: "little did he know that this seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death." It doesn't matter for our purposes here how the story goes after that, although you might imagine what effect such news has on poor Harold, and the efforts he goes to to find the source of the story he is living.

Now, the point of introducing Harold here is just this: we are in fact, all of us, all of the time, hearing a narration of our life story; we are just much less conscious of it. We are constantly being told what to eat, what to buy, how green to be, how much exercise we need, what we can and can't expect out of our relationships, how much we should work, what we need to earn, that we need a new phone or computer or car, where the best place to live is, how to bring up our children, who we should vote for (even *that* we should vote), who the good guys are and who are the baddies, and so on.

All of these things have, in a sense, already been worked out for us, and are presented to us as our story, or as competing stories. It is quite possible to live a life almost totally free of responsibility, apparently all the while making free decisions but in reality quite oblivious to the fact that we are simply riding the waves of a grand narrator's telling of a story: "this is who you are, and what your life can consist of".

The freedom we might think we have doesn't amount to much in the context of the great story into which we have been placed. It is not for nothing that we speak of Western and Eastern, or Modern and Primitive mentalities. We will largely do and be according the story which is ours by

virtue of where we are born – our parents, our culture, our history and our language.

Our particular culture, of course, has become very conscious of this binding by tradition, and part of our cultural response has been to render, if not all, then most traditions equal, meaning that our particular culture now both defensively permits particular traditions, while at the same time is suspicious of just those same particular traditions. But even given this complication it seems to remain the case that I am in a story; and that this story is what causes me to do what I do, to love what I love and to fear what I fear. To pick the concerns about predestination we noted in passing earlier, before we hear that God might have destined us to some particular end, we are already predestined to a particular life and series of choices, to the extent that our culture, history and family have imposed a story and destiny upon us before we even notice it.

In his extraordinary flowing forth in these verses today, Paul essentially declares to us: here is another story, the story of a different destiny. We have no neutral reference points from which to measure the validity of the story Paul tells; we may only compare it to the stories we already know and tell about ourselves.

But the important point is that, when we come here to the question of "belief" – "can I believe that what Paul tells us *is our* story" – this belief is not something set over against "knowledge". We are already believers in many things – we are already living a story which might have been *some other* story, so that we what we imagine to be given and true we might not have thought to be so, if we had some other story.

Now, I'm aware that this sounds all very convoluted and is probably difficult to follow, and I offer a qualified apology for that! *But*, we need to be wary of presuming that we know ourselves as well as we typically do presume. The energy with which we might reject what we hear from Paul indicates the energy with which we embrace something else. The *only* question, then, is whether what Paul says, or what I otherwise believe, makes more sense of me and my world. Or to put it in terms a bit closer to what typically matters to us in our lives: which story makes us better and freer people? Which reveals to us who we are? Which shows us the best ethic for a life of peace, not only for ourselves, but for others also?

Paul simply says *this* story is the one which has set him free. He speaks here of a humanity *unbounded* – unlimited because its purpose is quite simply the receiving and giving of the blessing he refers to, a blessing without limits. To quote from our text this morning, this is a humanity which, "in love", "according to the good pleasure of his will", "freely bestowed", "according to the riches of his grace", "with all

wisdom and insight", God has determined to make *our* humanity by giving all the blessings which might be had from the heavens.

For my part, this is a humanity I would be part of, that I might know the liberty of the children of God and share in God's liberating work.

By the grace of God, and to his glory, may many more join in receiving this story as their own. Amen.