

St Paul's letter to the Ephesians

Here at Bethlehem we are currently in a sermon series on the book of Ephesians. This book has been described by one commentator as Paul's 'most beautiful letter', and by another as 'the epistle for today'. Since we're preaching through this book on Sundays, we've encouraged congregation members to consider using Ephesians in their personal devotional reading as well. To further promote this, I'm taking the opportunity to write a little more about the book of Ephesians in this edition of News for the Pews.

The book of the New Testament we know as 'Ephesians' is a letter/sermon written to an early Christian congregation, or number of congregations, in and around the city of Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was in an area known as Asia Minor, and roughly what we now know as Turkey. We have some quite interesting background to Ephesus and its spirituality, not so much from the actual book of Ephesians, but from the book of Acts in chapters 19 and 20. In these chapters Paul's visit to Ephesus is described in some detail and it's an interesting and entertaining read!

There the Apostle Paul arrives and discovers some confused early Christian believers who had received John's baptism but had never heard of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7). Paul proceeds to the Synagogue to proclaim the Christian message, but without much success, and so takes his preaching to a 'lecture hall' every day for several years (19:8-10). These chapters also describe miraculous healings through handkerchiefs which had touched Paul (Acts 19:11,12), an interesting encounter with some Jewish exorcists (19:13-17), and people who had been involved in magic burning their former books after coming to faith (19:18-20). Then to cap it all off there was a great riot in the city because Paul's preaching of Jesus was reducing the profits of the local silversmith who made shrines and idols, and more importantly challenging the cult of the 'great goddess Artemis' whose temple was in Ephesus (19:21-41).

So the religious milieu in Ephesus was active and diverse. This is worth keeping in mind as we read Paul's later letter. The book of Ephesians focuses on themes like the spiritual blessings we have supremely in Christ Jesus, the unity between different groups of people that God brings about in Christ, and our spiritual struggle against 'the cosmic powers of the present darkness'. These are themes which make a lot of sense given the background in Ephesus described above.

Another piece of the background to keep in mind as we read Ephesians is that there was a deep affection between St Paul and the Christians there. Consider this beautiful scene as Paul met for the last time with the elders from Ephesus:

'When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all; they embraced him and kissed him, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again'. Acts 20:37,38

As we read Ephesians we hear Paul on a number of occasions offering very personal prayers for those to whom he is writing, which again fits well with the scene described in Acts. In other words, this letter is not a theological treatise abstracted from real life relationships, but is interwoven with very personal concerns and arises from an already existing Christian fellowship with each other.

It's also worth noting that Ephesus makes one final appearance in the New Testament after Acts and Ephesians, which is in the book of Revelation chapter 2. There the 'angels' or 'messengers' of seven different churches are given a particular message by Jesus. The first is to Ephesus and contains these verses:

'I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first'. Revelation 2:3-5

This is a sobering note to keep in mind as we work through the letter to the Ephesians. In the later chapters we hear the call to 'live in love as Christ loved us' (Eph 5:2), and then we have St Paul describing what this life of love looks like in particular contexts like those of marriage and family (Eph 5:22-6:4). The reference in Revelation would suggest that living this out was an on-going struggle for the Christians in Ephesus, as it is for us today.

Once again I encourage you to read, re-read, and meditate on this beautiful letter of St Paul's, inspired by the Holy Spirit, as we hear sermons from it in these months. As always the sermons are also available in audio format on the Bethlehem Church website if you'd like to listen to them there.

I'll finish with words from Ephesians, which are also my prayer for you as we work through this book:

'I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love'. Ephesians 3:16,17.

Yours in Christ, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer