

'The local church as an evangelistic community'

Last Sunday Jo spoke about our need to see our church, not just as something we attend on a Sunday morning, but as a community in which we experience a continuing transformation of our lives as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ. That kind of church, she said, would be attractive to non-Christians and would also encourage us to invite others to church events or worship services. She concluded her sermon with St Paul's prayer for the church at the end of Ephesians chapter 3. There Paul writes:

And now I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3.16–19)

Well, this is a wonderful prayer! But then Paul says the most surprising thing! He writes:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3.20-21)

'To him – that is to God – be glory in the church!' If you ask me that's one of the most surprising things in the Bible! Paul is writing to a local church, and he has the audacity to believe that God will be glorified in this small, local church! How is that going to happen? If we look at the state of many churches today, we might be tempted to ask Paul, 'What on earth were you thinking?'

And yet, that's Paul's prayer. Sure, he prays that God might be glorified 'in the church and in Christ Jesus' – and that's because God's glory will certainly not be seen without the presence of Jesus in a church – but that does not take away from the responsibility of the church somehow to show forth the glory of God.

This is not the only place that Paul emphasises this incredibly high view of the role of the local church. Earlier in Ephesians, at the close of chapter 1 Paul talks about how God's power, exercised for us, is seen in the resurrection of Jesus and his elevation to God's right hand where, as Paul puts it, God made Jesus '[God made him] . . . head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.' (Ephesians 1.22-23)

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We can get to know other people a bit through their words – we can read or listen to what they’ve had to say – but if we really want to get know someone, the best thing is to meet them in the flesh – that is, as they present to us in their bodies. What Paul is saying in this passage is that the church is the only body Christ has in this world, and if people are going to meet Jesus, the main way that will happen is through a church which recognises that it’s the body of Christ and is seeking to live out the fullness of Christ in its community life.

A bit further on in Ephesians 3.9-10 Paul speaks of his task of bringing the good news of Jesus to people so that, in the plan of God, as they become believers a new society is formed and so that (as Paul concludes), ‘. . . *through the church the wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*’ (Ephesians 3.10) The rulers and authorities in the heavenly places are generally understood as the spiritual powers that are opposed to God’s plan. What Paul is saying then is that through the quality of its communal life, the local church will be a demonstration of the wisdom of God to the powers opposed to the plan of God to redeem the world through the Lord Jesus Christ.

- So, as the church we are to show forth the glory of God.
- As the body of Christ we are to present the fullness of Christ to the world and,
- As God’s new society we are to be a demonstration of the wisdom of God to the spiritual powers in the heavenly places.

What all of this is saying to us is that, in the plan of God, as a local church, as an expression of the body of Christ, our church, the church that gathers here at Modbury, has an incredibly important role in demonstrating and declaring, to our community and beyond, the good news of Jesus. As we do that we bring glory to God.

A now deceased bishop of the Anglican church, not from this diocese, once remarked that asking a local church to manifest the glory of God seemed to him rather like asking the Snake Gully Town Band and Singers to perform Beethoven’s 9th Symphony. That seems an

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amusing analogy at first hearing, and we might be tempted to agree, we might be thinking, 'Yeah, what chance of that, really?' In fairness I have to say that the good bishop went on to say that it's possible that, whatever missed notes might be heard, occasionally the band and its choir might, almost accidentally, achieve a few musical phrases of such magnificence that listeners would be forced to recognise that the author of this music was incomparably great. That's a good insight, but I'm not sure that occasional moments of harmony is what Paul had in mind when he prayed that God might be glorified in the church - I think he's looking for a tad more consistency than that, and I would argue that this greater consistency is achievable. Let me make two points in support of that argument.

Firstly, I think we need to understand that glory can be seen in different ways in different situations. We tend to think of glory as something spectacular or awesome – a glorious sunset is spectacular, the finale of Beethoven's 9th (performed by the Berlin Philharmonic) is awesome. If we think of God being glorified in the church in that way we will probably be disappointed, at least in local churches! But glory can also be seen demonstrated in less spectacular, though sometimes equally awesome, ways. There's glory to be seen, for example in Mary's quiet faithfulness and courage as she accepts God's call to bear God's messiah. The glory that St Paul is speaking of here in Ephesians is also glory of a different kind – it's the glory of God's love being lived out by ordinary people as they follow Jesus. You could speak of this glory as the fullness of Christ on display in the life of a local church; you could speak of it as the glory of the fruit of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – evident in the life of a church. That's the glory of the gospel at work!

The second point I'd make is that the Snake Gully Band analogy leaves out a vital element. Paul prays that God might be glorified in the church but look again at the opening words of the prayer.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus . . .'

'The local church as an evangelistic community'

"... now to him who by the power at work within us"

This is the major difference between a local church and the Snake Gully Town Band. It's where the analogy breaks down. Snake Gully Band, you see, are on their own when they're trying to make music, whereas we have the power of the Holy Spirit working within us and among us. This is the vital element that the analogy leaves out – and it's probably one that we tend to leave out as well, because most of us, much of the time, tend to focus on our own inadequacies – or our church's inadequacies – rather than the power of God working in us. No wonder, then that so many local churches become mired in disappointment and pessimism. But look at Paul's prayer, he's not pessimistic, on the contrary he expects great things of God. '*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think,*²¹ *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus . . .*' Brothers and sisters, we must be careful not to let the poverty of our expectations limit the power of God.

Now, of course, God will not work in us against our will. If God is to do more abundantly than we can think or imagine, then we must be willing to open our lives, and the life of our church (which is actually Christ's church) – to the direction of the Holy Spirit. That's why St Paul moves on, from his great prayer at the end of Eph 3, to provide in Ephesians chapter 4 some spiritual direction for our life together as a Christian community and for the use of the gifts given to us by God for the upbuilding of the church community and the growth of its mission. As we heed the Holy Spirit's direction, and as we employ the gifts of the Holy Spirit, God will work amongst us in ways that exceed our often-pessimistic expectations. There's work involved for us, of course, and cost, and possibly suffering – but wouldn't you rather be part of a church which is making a significant difference for Jesus in its community, than to resign yourself to irrelevance and slow decline?

In 1789, a self-educated Baptist pastor called William Carey, in a sermon on the need for energetic Christian mission, reviewed the promises of God to those who will give themselves to God's work. He concluded his sermon with the words, 'Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.' And Carey lived this out! He worked energetically, expecting great things from God. Within a few years he had founded the

'The local church as an evangelistic community'

Baptist Missionary Society and shortly afterwards was involved in the formation of the London Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society, and half a dozen American mission societies. He started a work which, in total, will have transformed millions of lives through the efforts of these societies as their mission workers lived out and taught the good news of Jesus. Carey himself became a missionary in India where he translated the Bible into a number of Indian languages and, while doing that wrote a number of books on Indian grammar so as to extend literacy to the ordinary people of India. Amongst other things he went on to found the Agricultural – Horticultural Society of India, an innovation which from its beginning, encouraged the participation of Indian members with the aim of improving farming practice to make food more available and cheaper. Today, over 200 years later, the society Carey founded continues to serve the well-being of the Indian people through agricultural research and in India, contrary to current anti-colonialist rhetoric, Carey is regarded by many with affection, as one of the founders of modern India. "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God."

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.