The mystery of the gospel

Text: Ephesians 3:1-13

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 19:19-25; Ephesians 3:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 152, 73b, 22b, 216, 525

Series: Ephesians (Sermon #13)

Theme: From prison, Paul writes to the Ephesians about the mystery, now revealed, of the complete equality, without discrimination, of believing Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ, the church.

Proposition: Don’t panic – proclaim the mystery of the gospel instead.

**Introduction**

Many people around the world are currently stuck at home, ‘self-isolating’ and cut off from contact with others, apart perhaps from close family members or flat mates. We know that some governments are policing the streets to ensure that citizens remain in lockdown at home; effectively placing them as prisoners in their own dwellings. It was a little like that for the Apostle Paul when he wrote this letter to the Ephesians (but not because of a global pandemic!).

He was under ‘house-arrest’ in the capital of the country we now know as Italy (Acts 28:16). Before being imprisoned in Rome, he had been held in Jerusalem and then Caesarea as a direct consequence of his mission to the Gentiles. He had been charged with (amongst other things) breaking the temple law which separated Jews from Gentiles (Acts 21:28). Here we find Paul ‘working from home’ – using the time he has to encourage and teach the Ephesian Christians while he waits to see how his uncertain future will unfold in God’s good providence.

If he was isolated at home today, he might have used the phone, email, and social media to communicate the comfort and power of the gospel rather than putting pen to parchment. It’s clear from his writing in this letter and also in his epistles to the Colossians and Philippians that he is not in a state of fear or anxiety, but of hope, joy and confidence in Christ. In fact, he encourages his brothers and sisters in the Lord that God has used his enforced ‘self-isolation’ for the advance of the gospel (Phil 1:12).

Under God’s perfect oversight of His Creation, all things were working together for the good of His people, even though this was not immediately obvious from Paul’s imprisonment. Brothers and sisters be comforted and assured. God is no less in control today.

Having written about the inclusion of Gentiles in the church (2:11-22), Paul begins this section of his letter to the Ephesians with these words: “*For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles*” and then he strays off the subject of his incarceration in verses 2-12 before returning to his own situation by saying in verse 13: “*So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory*”. Paul does not want the (largely Gentile) church to be discouraged by what he has suffered in order to bring the gospel to them.

We are going to look now at Paul’s digression (or ‘side-track’) in verses 2-12 as he writes about the mystery of the gospel. There are three points this morning:

1. The mystery revealed
2. The mystery explained
3. The mystery proclaimed
4. **The mystery revealed**

We are now increasingly isolated as a nation from the rest of the world as we, like many other countries go into ‘lock down’ mode with our borders closed to those who are not part of us. For a very different reason, the Old Testament nation of Israel was separated from the other people groups of the world. This was God’s revealed will for the descendants of believing Abraham (Gen 15:6). He said to the Israelites through His servant Moses: “*Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exo 19:5-6). To be holy is to be ‘set apart’.

Israel was not to be like her Gentile neighbours; however, she was also not to completely isolate herself either. The holy nation of God’s people was to be a brightly attractive reflection of the glory of their Lord as they visibly lived their lives in trust and obedience as a response to the grace of their God. This ministry of gathering non-Israelites from the nations is expressed by the Lord through his prophet Isaiah in these words: "*I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people,* ***a light for the nations***” (Isaiah 42:6, also 49:6; 60:3). This was God’s plan; as revealed in His covenant with Abraham through whom he would bless “*all the families of the earth*” (Gen 12:3b).

We heard the amazing prophesy earlier from Isaiah 19 that Israel’s enemies Egypt and Assyria would become part of God’s people on a completely equal basis with Israel – “*In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria*” (Isaiah 19:24). Now we know that non-Jews could become part of the covenant community of Israel by coming to the ‘light’ of the holy nation as she displayed the glory of her Lord. This was the entry route followed by individuals like Rahab the believing prostitute in Jericho and Ruth the Moabitess.

However, for a Gentile to become part of Israel, complete conversion to Judaism was required. (For a man this necessitated the painful rite of circumcision. Baptism was also a requirement, as was the observance of all ceremonial regulations such as distinguishing between clean and unclean foods). Gentile converts had to become like Jews. There was effectively a change of ethnic identity which then enabled them to be integrated, at least to some degree into the Jewish community. It was no secret that Gentiles could be included in God’s covenant by conversion to become Jews.

Yet Paul speaks of a mystery here – something which was ‘*not made known to the sons of men in other generations but which has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit*’. Whilst it is clear from the Old Testament is that people from Gentile nations like Egypt and Assyria were going to become part of the covenant community of God’s people without becoming Jews, the question was how? The answer was hidden until Christ came. The flow of Gentile converts into the community of God’s people was a small trickle before the mystery of the equal status of Gentiles as fellow heirs to the covenant promise of God was brought to light in Christ and revealed to ‘*the holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit*’. The Apostle Paul was one of those to whom God revealed the mystery of the gospel from the time when He first encountered the Risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. The gospel of grace revealed to Paul was the good news that we are not saved by works, our feeble and failing attempts to obey God’s law, but by faith alone in Christ alone.

Most of us have heard of Sherlock Homes; a fictional private detective whom author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has applying observation, deduction, forensic science and logic to solve crime cases. Once Sherlock Homes has revealed the solution, the previously perplexing case is no longer an enigma. Once a mystery is explained it is no longer a mystery!

So, it is with the good news of Christ bringing together people from all the nations into a single new ‘holy nation’ in God’s family. The mystery of the gospel had been hidden, but has now been revealed. God has chosen to work out His plan of salvation for His people over a span of time. He selected a particular point in history at which to bring to light before men what He had previously known, but had kept secret. It was through direct revelation to the Apostle Paul that God exposed the exceedingly wide extent of the unifying, saving, work of Christ (Gal 1:11-17).

In verse 9, Paul refers to God’s orderly plan of salvation with the word “stewardship”. This was a term used of the management or administration of a household. This is the word from which our English term “economy” is derived. We should not think of the current chaos on world financial markets when we consider this word, but quite the opposite. Consider a well-ordered home which has meals at regular times, often a chore-chart on the fridge, specified bedtimes for the children and a weekly food budget. There is a pre-determined plan and it is carefully followed in order to manage the home.

This is the sense of the term “stewardship” as it is applied to God’s ‘administration’ of the mystery of the gospel. This previously unseen administration of God’s plan of salvation is not some saving afterthought on God’s part. It is not a precarious, uncertain and tentative ‘plan B’. This previously unseen economy of God’s plan of salvation is one of the riches of Christ which had been brought to light. It has not been revealed by accident, but by God’s prearranged predetermined purpose which He has and is working out according to the purpose of His will (Eph 1:11).

The current turmoil in this world due to COVID-19 which has hugely impacted our lives and will likely continue to do so for some time is also part of God’s predetermined purpose in history. As someone has said “*Whilst we don’t know what the future holds, we know the one who holds the future*”. God is acting in this broken world to bring ultimate and lasting healing to the nations through the gospel which has now been fully revealed in the person and work of Christ and explained through the apostolic teaching of the New Testament, which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The mystery explained**

As a Jewish Pharisee who had been ‘*educated at the feet of Gamaliel*’ (Acts 22:3) Paul knew the Old Testament Scriptures so well, but now he was able to see the wonderful economy, the careful stewardship, the global administration of the plan of God throughout history in bringing to completion the unifying work of Christ. No wonder that he quotes from the OT so often in his letters (e.g. Romans 60x, Corinthians 27x, Galatians 10x, Ephesians 6x, Timothy 2x). The connections to God’s past redemptive signs, symbols and types now made wonderfully clear to him through the inspiration, the enlightening, of the Holy Spirit.

Consider a painting. It has been meticulously crafted by a master artist. Only his eyes have ever seen this work. This creation is exquisite, but it remains veiled, hidden in the artist’s studio until it is finally completed and ready to be revealed to the public. Think of the joy, the excitement, of seeing this work of beauty, that had been so long hidden, for the first time.

Paul had already communicated to the Ephesians about the unlocking of this mystery, as he notes in verse 3 “*as I have written briefly*”. He could be referring to earlier in this letter where he mentions the mystery God’s will now revealed in Christ to unite all things in Him (Eph 1:9-10). He could also be referring to Christ breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, reconciling isolated people groups both to one another and to God (Eph 2:14-15). If this letter was intended for an audience beyond the city of Ephesus and included Christians in the Lycus valley then ‘as I have written briefly’ may refer to Col 1:25-27. Here the glory of the mystery of the gospel is seen in the inclusion of Gentiles in the church.

Whilst we can’t be sure about the exact nature of Paul’s prior writing to the readers of this letter about the mystery of the gospel, we do know exactly what this mystery is from verse 6: “*..that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*”. The mystery revealed is how God has united the diversity of nations in one body, in one Spirit, in one Lord, in one faith through Christ Jesus (Eph 4:4-7).

There had been a history of hostility, of antagonism, between the Jewish people and the surrounding nations. Peace had come through Christ, who has broken down the division between these distinct groups (Eph 2:13-16), bringing believers from both ethnicities into full communion with God through the sacrifice of His blood.

Has the ‘mystery of the gospel’ been revealed and explained to you? Do you know the ultimate solution to all your problems, all your fears, all your anxieties? Have those around you also heard?

Think about those who close by you. People with whom you will likely have greater opportunity to connect with over the coming months. Paul had the immense privilege of being able to see clearly what previously had been kept secret; the veil had been lifted (2 Cor 3:14-16). He had received the grace from God of being enabled to bring this mystery to light to both Jews and Gentiles. To reveal that Gentiles were now included as fellow heirs and members of the body of Christ. What a licence. What a privilege. What a gift of grace. One which completely overshadowed Paul’s situation in prison.

Brothers (and sisters), do we not share the same gift with Paul of being able to reveal what God has done in gathering the church from the nations? Do we not have even more light than Paul as we have full access to the entire Old and New Testament Scripture? Do we not have even more light than Paul as we witness almost 2000 years of God’s gathering of His people from many nations into one body?

Paul’s future under house arrest, awaiting trial in Rome was very uncertain. So is yours and mine, especially as the threat of COVID-19 is here on our ‘doorstep’. For so many people around, us the gospel is a ‘mystery’. They know little or nothing about how Christ has brought people from every tribe tongue and nation together in peace so that they are no longer isolated from God or from one another in Him. In times like these, as at all times, there is a pressing need for the mystery of the gospel to be proclaimed, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The mystery proclaimed**

Paul’s own immense comfort throughout his trials was in knowing the magnitude and significance of God’s gift to him as the commissioned ‘Apostle to the Gentiles’. However, vital though his role as an apostle was, Paul describes himself in verse 8 as ‘the very least of all the saints’. Was he not a Jew of impeccable credentials, well educated in the OT Scriptures? Was he not also born a Roman citizen, a legal and social rank much to be desired? Was he not the one whom God had used to plant so many churches in Asia Minor? Yes, this is all true, BUT Paul also knew what he once was: a vigorous persecutor of Christ Jesus, the Son of God (Acts 22:7-8). He knew that although his pedigree and accomplishments might look impressive, he was in fact a weak (2 Cor 10;10) and inadequate man (2 Cor 2:16) facing a daunting task. Do you ever feel like that? Paul knew that apart from God’s gift of grace in Christ he was nothing. This was no fake humility on his part, but a mature acknowledgement of who he was.

In contrast to himself, Paul then speaks of the gift, the privilege given to him by God; to proclaim the gospel, in particular to the Gentiles. The content of this spoken gospel is rich. Whilst material wealth can be measured, the value of the content of the proclamation of the good news of God is beyond computation. Words in any language are utterly insufficient to describe the limitless majesty, worth and power of the living Christ.

Paul qualifies the wealth of Christ with the word “unsearchable” in verse 8. This means to have no knowable bounds. The “unsearchable riches of Christ” are first and foremost our Lord Himself. Jesus Christ constitutes the boundless riches of the gospel. He is the fullness of the good news. The “unsearchable riches of Christ” also encompasses Christ’s work. The eternal riches which belong to Him. This immeasurable wealth speaks of all that has been accomplished by Christ. The gift of preaching this limitless treasure to the nations was given to Paul. The thought of which totally overshadowed, eclipsed, and minimised the ‘momentary’ misery of three or more years of confinement in prison for him. He could not contain the bountiful content that was Christ, it had to come out of him. He could not withhold proclaiming the riches of Christ (1 Cor 9:6).

Now it is interesting that the word Paul uses “to preach” here in verse 8 includes both the action of public (e.g. Luke 4:43) and private (e.g. Acts 8:35) proclamation of the mystery of the gospel. So, you see, brothers and sisters we too have the gift of God’s grace to be able to proclaim the wealth of Christ. This is not just a specific and unique commission like that of Paul as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13; 1 Tim 2:7), but a general calling to proclaim the riches of our Lord as we speak of the gospel. This gift from God is not restricted to ordained Ministers of the Word but has far broader scope. This gift is given to all who are part of the church, as we proclaim the unfathomable riches of Christ. We, like Paul, are sinners, men and women with ‘clay feet’. Having the treasure of the unfathomable riches of Christ in earthen vessels, “*so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not of ourselves*” (2 Cor 4:7).

Notice also, that not only is the mystery of the gospel proclaimed to the nations, it is also made known to the ‘*rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*’ (v10). The emphasis in this phrase is on the angels in heaven, rather than the spiritual forces of darkness (Eph 6:12). {The two terms “rulers” and “authorities” do not present a hierarchy of angelic society, but simply an acknowledgement that there are different spheres of authority in the heavenly realms (cf. Eph 1:21)}. Angels, like us, are created, dependent beings living in the domain of time. They are not all-knowing as God is.

One of the angelic functions in serving God had historically been that of being a messenger to mankind (Heb 1:14). Here the roles of message carrier and recipient are completely reversed. The church, as a unified body of many different people is to proclaim, to reveal, the manifold wisdom of God to the heavenly host, to celestial spectators. God, through His church, teaches the angels. We see this truth elsewhere in scripture when the Apostle Peter speaks of the long-awaited gospel of salvation in Christ, preached through those who have received the Holy Spirit, “*things into which angels long to look*” (1 Peter 1:12). The revelation of God is progressive through time and God has hidden at least part of His wise plan, even from His angels.

Paul exalts the wisdom of God, describing it as “manifold” in verse 10. This term is a magnified form of the word used in the Greek OT for Joseph’s multi-coloured tunic (Gen 38:3). This cloak was distinctively woven with many different shades and hues of colour. To an infinitely greater degree the wisdom of God is multi-faceted. Like a perfectly cut diamond with a multitude of faces which refract the light in a myriad of different spectral colours, so is the manifold knowledge, judgement, and work of God. The emphasis here is on God’s wisdom, in particular as it is displayed in the rich ethnic diversity within the body of Christ now. Now, in this present age the period between the bringing to light of God’s sovereign plan for the Gentiles and the second coming of Christ.

In the church of the Lord Jesus Christ there is a multiplicity of different races and types of people; we see that wonderfully clearly represented in this congregation here. God is gathering His people to Himself; the church which will be with Christ her Lord in glory. The unity of the body of Christ then reflects the wisdom of God in the manner in which He has brought Gentiles into His kingdom. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a mosaic; a tapestry of many nations. The wisdom of God is seen in His glorious weaving of a multitude of seemingly tangled threads into one glorious pattern. The wisdom that has brought many diverse individuals to become united with Christ by faith and therefore in union with one another as fellow members of Christ’s body, the church.

Brothers and Sisters, the church is the sole instrument through which God has chosen to reveal to the heavenly host the marvellous wisdom of His gathering of His people from the nations. As we proclaim the gospel, and as God gathers His church, the angels in heaven are being taught about the multi-facetted wisdom of God.

What a motivation to continue to actively serve God in the proclamation of the gospel. What a motivation to desire that the church may function as one unified body of believers in the bond of peace. What a comfort when the difficulties we often encounter in service might tempt us to lose heart. How much our communities, our and world need to hear of the mystery of the gospel as so many are gripped by panic, fear, and anxiety over COVID-19.

Here’s a closing suggestion before the virus spreads into our community (which means with some degree of urgency), go and meet your neighbours and swap phone numbers. Ask if they have everything they need. Tell them you’ll be praying for them (and pray for them). Tell them that you’d welcome the opportunity to speak to them about the mystery of the gospel. Be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, doing so with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15-16.

And remember – don’t panic, proclaim the mystery of the gospel instead!

AMEN