

15th Sunday Ordinary Time, 15.7.18

St Mary Magdalen

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+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament were distinguished from other prophets perhaps for several things, but certainly for one thing in particular: their message. Now, I'm not talking about theological content here, though that was surely different, too. I'm talking about the *nature* of their message, which was almost always that of judgement—even doom and gloom. God basically tells them, 'Go and tell everyone bad news, you will have no friends, no romance, no feasts, cake or parties, and everyone will hate you'. Put an ad for that post in the Church Times and see who applies! But the message was also not so great for their hearers much of the time.

The Prophets of Israel knew how to speak to power. The seers and prophets of surrounding nations were typically servants of the king, members of the royal household, and saw their duty principally to please their employer. Amos here is forbidden from prophesying at the national shrine, as Amaziah is appalled that he would speak harsh words to the authorities. But Amos responds by saying he is not a prophet at all, just a shepherd whom God called to do some prophesying. He distinguishes between being a 'prophet' as a form of employment and the act of being called by God to prophecy. 'I am a different kind of "seer" than you are used to', Amos tells Amaziah, 'with a different kind of mission'.

In a similar way that Amos is set apart from others of his day, so are the disciples in Mark's Gospel. They are sent out with instructions about not carrying bread, or a money bag, or spare change, in a way that demands they receive hospitality from others to meet their needs, but that also distinguishes them from other traveling teachers of the time, in particular the Cynics, who traveled from town to town teaching with money bags open, looking for payment and expanding their academic career opportunities.

Both Amos and the disciples are distinguished from neighbouring teachers and prophets. Something *new* is happening. A new sort of messenger, a new sort of message, and a new sort of people. And our reading in Ephesians gives us a breathtakingly beautiful picture of what this newness is like.

It begins with blessing, and the particular word for 'Blessed' that Paul uses here is only used of God in the New Testament. And it is meant to tell us that nothing more beautiful, more wonderful, more desirable than God can ever be spoken of or even imagined. All the things we think we need in this world, all the things we are continually anxious about and all the things we have been convinced that we must desire; all of it is nothing in comparison to being the object of this most blessed love. God in Christ is more desirable, more wonderful, more beautiful, because this blessedness reaches out, it stoops low, to include and embrace each one of us.

This blessed God and Father has 'blessed us', Paul writes, 'with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places'.

And we are not left to wonder what this blessed life looks like. A series of bold and lavish phrases spell out who we truly are when God's blessing meets us in Christ: 'holy and blameless before God', 'destined in love' to be God's children, 'redeemed' and 'forgiven according to the riches of grace that is lavished on us', and still more, promised the fullness of the inheritance that awaits us as we are united in Christ in God's perfect love forever.

'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', because our fulfilment, the shape of all human bliss from beginning to end is met in the source and aim of all blessing.

The most astonishing feature of Paul's benediction is that he claims all of this hope, this promise, is found 'in Christ'. 'In Christ' we are blessed, 'in him' we are chosen, 'in him' we have redemption, 'in him' we are destined, 'in him' we have heard the word of truth and believed, 'in him' we are sealed in the Holy Spirit, all in the span of 11 verses.

It is difficult for us to relate to the radical statement Paul is making. He is saying to people perhaps within living memory of Jesus, that Christ has explained, lived out, and made a reality the fullness of God's purposes in the world. This man who walked the same earth as Paul's hearers and breathed the same air. The hearers who have learned of his teachings and life not through centuries of tradition and sacred texts but as bedtimes stories, are meant to accept the claim that he makes sense of everything. That he is the key unlocking the mystery of God's purposes in the world and where we meet God's perfect love among us. That God's love has been embodied in this crucified and risen Jesus.

'In him', the carpenter's son from Nazareth, Mary's boy, we have redemption, forgiveness, an inheritance, a destiny: 'every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places'. But what does this really mean? 'Spiritual blessing in heavenly places' sounds a bit distant, irrelevant, out of reach. But, Paul argues they are meant to make us 'holy and blameless before Got in love'. This is a blessed life lived *now*.

There is a subsection of Christianity that focusses its teaching on a sort of 'pie-in-the-sky' escapism: don't worry about your current troubles, justice for the oppressed, provision for those in poverty, care for the vulnerable, we have the promise of heaven one day. And Christianity becomes hopelessly irrelevant for everyone except the privileged who have a relatively easy life. Even though, ironically, Jesus himself said that he came for those who are poor, vulnerable, oppressed, sick, and marginalised. Modern Christians completely ignoring Christ, go figure.

But this branding of Christianity, so-called, forgets that characteristic of our blessed God's love, that it stoops low to embrace the world in all its brokenness and frailty. 'In Christ' that distant otherness of the heavenly places has come near. Jesus Christ is the temporal and local expression of the Father's blessing on us; the embodiment of our inheritance. So that rather than escaping our lives and world, the messy and material, the broken and the bodily, our every-day human reality is where our hope and our promise, the love that redeems us, shows up.

The great mystery of our salvation, that radical message Paul writes to the Ephesians, is that God has redeemed humanity from within humanity itself, so that our every thought and action, every breath and every step is inhabited by God's timeless,

infinite love. There is perhaps nothing that could be more relevant, more present in our lives than this. God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places because heaven itself has come to dwell among us.

The blessed divine life 'in Christ', found within our flesh and blood and bones, proclaims to all of us that we are loved. You, whoever you are, whatever you've done, or whatever has been done to you; wherever you find yourself, you, the real you with all your faults and frailties, joys and sorrows, you are loved. God's love in Christ has welcomed you.

'In Christ' something new is happening: a life of inclusion in God's blessed love. So come now to this altar, hold out our hands to receive God's love among us for our salvation, and to be received in turn in God's warm embrace.