

**God's power at work in us** (Eph. 3.14-21; Jn 6.1-21)

*Lord, as we study Paul's prayer for the Ephesians this morning, may it inspire and strengthen us in our own prayers for ourselves and others. Amen.*

First of all, a **confession**. I can't honestly claim to be very interested in football. Can I hear cries of "*Shame!*" from the back? But I do recognise the wonderful bonding influence of football right around the world and it is great to think that All Saints is hosting a mini-World Cup this afternoon in partnership with Bradford Action for Refugees.

Despite not being too bothered about football, I do know enough about sport to realise that for a team to do well, training is vital, and that a **pep talk** from the manager or trainer before the start and at half time is essential if the players are to put their training effectively into practice.

Well, this morning is a bit like **half time**. In case it has escaped your notice, we are half way through a **mini-series** on Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, a letter probably written towards the end of his life when imprisoned in Rome, at a time when the Ephesians were in need of encouragement.

The overall theme is that of togetherness in love. The **first two chapters** are all about what we believe and the **last three** contain practical, grassroots advice on how to live the Christian life. What we believe should not be an intellectual exercise but something that determines the way we live.

Today's chapter 3 is the **crucial link between the two sections**, a bit like the manager's pep talk in that it shows us how to get inner strength and God's power at work in our lives. It contains one of the most wonderful prayers in the Bible.

If you would like to follow the Ephesians passage (p. 1174 in the pew bibles) you will see that it starts with the word *kneel*. For Paul, ***kneeling before the Father*** (v.14) was the appropriate way to acknowledge God's majesty and glory. That would have immediately got the Ephesians' attention, because kneeling wasn't the usual early Christian posture any more than it is for many Christians today. Indeed, early Christians stood with outstretched arms and lifted eyes just as *Jesus looked towards heaven and prayed* (Jn 17.1) when he offered up his wonderful

prayer (Jn 17.2-26) for his disciples and all believers just before his arrest: *Father, the hour has come.*

Paul's prayer is intimate, but not casual or flippant. God is approached and experienced as Father. In the ancient Mediterranean world, "father" referred to a position both of power and of intimacy. A **pun on the Greek words** for Father (*pater*) and family (*patria*) allows Paul to remind his readers that all families (in the sense of extended families or clans, not the modern Western nuclear family) and therefore all people owe their existence to God (v.15).

This wonderful prayer is in two parts. The **first part** (vv.16-19) is intercession for the Christians Paul is writing to. He wants them to experience the living reality of the salvation that is already theirs. Paul prays that God will act according to his nature and character and strengthen the Ephesian believers: *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may **strengthen you with power through his Spirit** in your inner being* (v.16). Our inner being is not obvious to others, but is accessible to God if we allow him entry. What wonderful words! *Strengthened with power* – just what some football teams may pray for at half time! But God's offer is better than the best manager's pep talk or the most powerful energy drink.

We can all be *strengthened with power*, not just the Bible "heavyweights" like John the Baptist whose birth we remember today, the 24<sup>th</sup> June. Think of a "lightweight", **the boy** in our famous Gospel story about the feeding of the five thousand. Little did he know the **potential** of his five small barley loaves and two small fish (Jn 6.9). Perhaps it's a good thing that in those days children weren't taught not to speak to strangers!

**John the Baptist** certainly needed inner strength as he went around with his powerful message: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"* (Mt 3.1).

I don't want to neglect John the Baptist on his day so perhaps you will allow me a **little diversion**. I still remember from my school days a Latin master who was a dab hand at throwing chalk in class. He'd soon be in trouble these days! I don't suppose he ever repented of his unprofessional activities, but we forgave him repeatedly as he was such a good Latin teacher.

(CHALK THROWN) Sorry, Dick. Did I hit you? I am sorry. Will you forgive me? Just supposing I was to indulge in more unseemly behaviour in the pulpit and start

lobbing chalk at you all. Would you forgive me if I kept on saying I was sorry? You're a forgiving lot, but how long could I go on throwing chalk before someone says "No"? Then what would I need to do to be forgiven? I'd need to show that I've changed my lifestyle and given up the evil pastime of chalk throwing to **demonstrate true repentance and be truly forgiven**. To be truly forgiven by God, we need to truly repent, and we may need a lot of inner strength to manage that, especially if dealing with more serious matters than throwing chalk.

Back with our **Ephesians passage**, we may well ask how this *strengthening with power* comes about? It is done through the Spirit (v.16). And how does the Spirit empower the believers Paul is praying for so boldly? It is through oneness of **love, the main theme of this letter, being rooted and established in love** (v.17) and *knowing the love of Christ* (v.19). This is no "head knowledge" but a transforming encounter of love, because *this love surpasses knowledge* (v. 19). Intellectually, it is impossible to *grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ* (v.18). Nobody can describe it. Faber said that *the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind*. One of Charles Wesley's hymns celebrates each dimension of God's love and describes *the depth of Jesus' all-redeeming love*:

*Deeper than hell, it plucked me thence;  
Deeper than inbred sin:  
Jesus' love my heart shall cleanse,  
When Jesus enters in.*

Paul prays that through the Spirit the Ephesians may be able to fully experience and take in the immeasurable love of Christ. We'll be reminded of the **breadth, length, depth and height** of God's love in our next hymn.

The **second part** of the prayer (vv.20-21) is equally bold. As Paul's prayer becomes praise, he thanks and glorifies the One *who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us* (v.20). We are all to praise God, the God who is at work in us and in his Church.

What wonderful words – **God's power at work within us!** The marvellous thing is that this spiritual boost is not confined to the start of our lives or when we first became a Christian. Nor is it only offered at half time, as it were. So we needn't feel out of things, if like most of us here this morning, **we feel we are well past**

**half time in our spiritual lives.** As our next hymn will remind us, we are *here for a season, then above*, so can echo the words: *O Lamb of God, I come*. Wherever we are on our Christian journey, we can claim **God's power at work within us** at any time, including this morning. We only have to ask God *who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine* (v.20).

What a **marvellous promise!** You can see why Ephesians Chapter 3 contains one of the most wonderful prayers in the Bible.

There's no time like the present for inviting God into our lives, so **let's finish in prayer:** *Loving Father, strengthen us with power in our inner being through your Holy Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through love* (vv.16-17).

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* (vv.20-21).