

SERMON BY LCA SA/NT BISHOP DAVID ALTUS

Worship Service at General Convention Synod

Thursday, 1 October

Text: Ephesians 3:7-13

Our theme word for today is 'Listening', and in today's Gospel Jesus said to us: 'Blessed are your ears because you hear'. (Matthew 13:16)

A man came out of church one day with his elderly father and said to me: 'Pastor, dad is so happy today – he got hearing aids this week and he really enjoyed hearing your sermon'. I said: 'I'm pleased to hear that' - until I remembered that every Sunday for five years his dad had greeted me at the church door saying, 'Wonderful sermon, Pastor' – he hadn't heard one of them! What I had been saying remained a complete mystery to him.

I wonder what you heard in God's word from Ephesians 3:7-13 this morning. Four times in Ephesians Chapter 3, Paul refers to a mystery involving the church.

There are many mysteries about the LCA. I wonder what they might be to you. (One of the proposals for synod says the call system is a complete mystery to some of you! What really goes on in COB and GCC meetings? It could be your pastor's sermon, or perhaps you are mystified as to why people don't agree with you on your taste in church music or perhaps the ordination of women...)

St Paul says the greatest mystery about us, the church, is really no mystery, no secret at all. In fact the mystery, the secret can be summed up in three-and-a-half words: 'We're all included'.

'This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.' (v6)

Each one of us here today is included in God's strategic plan, his mysterious will 'to bring all things in heaven and earth under one head, Jesus Christ'. (Ephesians 1:9,10)

Jews and Gentiles, black and white, rich and poor, male and female, young and old, Australians, New Zealanders, Asians and Africans, Victorians and Queenslanders - sinners of all types caught up together in God's forgiving love shown to us in Jesus Christ. All brought back together with God and each other through him.

God planned for your own inclusion long before you were ever born. It remained hidden even to the angels, but it is a secret, a mystery no longer.

We hear Ephesians 3 at Epiphany – the revealing or uncovering of God's mind and heart, his person and his plan to the world – both Jew and Gentile, in Jesus.

In many ways God and his ways remain a mystery to us but not his heart, not his intention towards us and the world. There is no secret, nothing hidden about God's intentions towards us. We know them for sure because we know Jesus, God's complete revealing of himself to us.

'What's the big deal?', I hear you think. 'We have heard that before, and a secret that we have heard loses its mystery'. But this mystery like many in life is meant to be forever marvelled at, even though we now know how it works.

The danger is that we assume we have a right to be here, thinking it is our church and 'our will be done' in it, inevitably leading to disunity.

St Paul never stopped shaking his head in wonder when he thought about his own inclusion in God's plan to unite the universe in Christ, and his own call to give witness to the God who in Christ loves and forgives, includes and unites us all together.

'Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God.' (v8,9)

I hope you never lose that sense of wonder and incredulousness that God wants you. You were not just elected by your parish to be here but chosen by God to be in heaven forever. (Being gathered together as church here in Queensland is just a taste of paradise!)

And with St Paul we are not only *included* in God's strategic plan, we are *involved* in it. Together with the church of all time and places, we are called to give witness to 'the boundless riches of Christ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery'. (v8,9)

We know God's intention towards us in Christ. Paul says this about God's *intention*, his strategic plan, for the church: 'His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms'. (v10)

Did you *hear that*?

You and I as part of his church are 'Exhibit A' for God's multi-coloured and multifaceted wisdom. We are here not to *be* a mystery to the world but to *share* the mystery of God's love in Christ *with* the world – seen and unseen.

Paul says God points even the unseen world to his church and says, 'Watch, listen, and learn about my wisdom at work!' 'Watch what happens when they worship. Watch what happens when they work together'.

It's not just the people in the other room who didn't get a guernsey as delegates who will watch on; not just the rest of the LCA watching and listening back home; not even the rest of the Lutheran world and our ecumenical brothers and sisters in Christ; not just the media and the unbelieving world who may or may not be

watching and listening to this part of God's church at work here in Synod - but the unseen forces and powers in the heavenly realms!

And the angels are not looking on to place bets on who wins and who loses here, but learning and wondering how God's grace will play out among us, how God's wisdom will be on display among us. The unseen demonic world too, that is hell-bent on pulling apart what God has put together, is also watching and listening, as chapter 6 will remind us.

What do you hope the "powers that be" - on earth and in heaven, and even in hell itself will hear as they watch and listen to the LCA in these days? No doubt journalists have prepared two front pages for the Sunday papers, depending on Saturday's Grand Final result. If you were our LCA Communications team what headlines might you have prepared in advance for the world to hear and read at the end of Synod on the cover of the next edition of *The Lutheran*? Perhaps Linda has one in her bag that says: 'Church moves forward in faith and ordains women', or the other one might read: 'Church holds ground and remains faithful'. Which one are you hoping for?

But what about a third possibility, whatever the vote on Saturday. Might it read: 'We're still together! Christ keeps his church united against the odds'.

So as we walk together over to sessions this morning, with St Paul shake your heads as you go in humility and wonder at the mystery that says: 'We're all included', we're together in the 'mystery of Christ'.

We are not holding together by a thread as some think, but by a cross.

In fact we have just partaken together of the mystery that is Christ himself in the sacrament, one body enjoying one bread.

Remember throughout the day that, as his one body the church, we are his mysterious wisdom at work, and that this world, and other realms too, are listening and watching God's wisdom on display even as we meet.

To him be the glory today as always.

'Blessed are your ears because you hear.' (Matthew 13:16)