

SERMON BY LCA BISHOP JOHN HENDERSON

Opening Service of General Convention of Synod

Tuesday, 29 September 2015

Text: Ephesians 1:17-18

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

God, our Father, loves you...

The Father of glory, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, he loves you...

He loved you before you were in the womb.

He loved you before you were reborn through water and the word.

He loved you yesterday, he loves you today, and he will love you tomorrow.

That's what we believe the Scriptures tell us. We stake our lives on it. God loves you. You are free. You are his child, his heir, living in his love.

Everything we have is God's and God is everything we have. It has always been like that from the beginning. He is our life. We do not earn it or do anything that suggests we should deserve it. Grace is everything.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹

Yes, love truly has come to life.

Tonight we have heard the prayer of St Paul for the Ephesian Christians of his day: *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people...*

Now what if that were a prayer for this Synod! Wisdom, revelation, enlightenment, hope, riches, a glorious inheritance: what an event it will be!

It all began for St Paul on the Damascus road². What happened there forced him to question the religion in which he had been strictly raised and trained, the faith of his fathers. Paul, then called Saul, was a zealous Jew breathing threats and murder against the Christians and their faith. He was on his way to imprison the Christians in Damascus and take them to Jerusalem for judgement. Suddenly, when he was almost there, Jesus confronted him. Suddenly blind and helpless, Paul could only continue his journey by letting another take over the direction his life.

His encounter with Jesus changed Paul completely: no longer the Law of Moses, but now the gospel of Jesus Christ; no longer just the Jews, but Jew and Gentile, clean

¹ John 3:16 NIV

² Acts 9

and unclean, as one. Like Martin Luther centuries later, Paul re-read the Scriptures he already thought he knew so well. The gospel shone through and convicted him. Once he had been enthusiastic for the tradition of his fathers, but now he was called by God's grace.³ He left the security of what he had known in the past—the holiness code, sacrifices and appeasement, regulation and ritual, balancing works and judgement. Now he gave everything to preaching and teaching a bold and courageous faith of forgiveness, freedom, and unity in Christ. Although it took many years to form him for this ministry, he did not deviate from the life God set before him, even to his death.

Now, today, through the power of the Word and the Spirit, the same Jesus Paul met on the road meets us in his letters. In them he reveals the joy of discovering God's love in Christ. His hymns of praise are ecstatic, exceeding the constraints of language. Paul—a human being like all other human beings, fallible and partial—introduces us to the Jesus he knows. He carefully and patiently teaches us the faith, how it was lived in the early days, how lives were transformed, and even what arguments the early Christians had among themselves as they discovered the implications of the gospel and how it cut against the old requirements of the law. He shows us the necessity of transforming human nature, and he shows us how God does it, through Christ.

In these two short verses from Ephesians this evening, what comes across most is his total confidence in the faith. Jesus Christ is everything. God calls us in his name. God gives us a rich inheritance in him.

When Paul writes about such saving faith he is always very careful to say that God is the one who saves. God gives the spirit of wisdom and understanding. God enlightens the eyes of the heart. God calls us to his hope. God guarantees the glorious inheritance in his holy people.

Were we required to do any of this or contribute even in a small way it would be a total disaster. 100% God, 0% us. Hard on our human pride, I know, but that's how it is. It's why we can be confident in the God who loves us, and the faith he gives us.

In the things of faith and in matters of salvation, God is always the doer. It's all about him, not about us.

As we explore and live out this message day by day it is natural for us to fight against it. We look at ourselves and ask, 'What must we do?' Surely there must be more to it? Surely People have to pay their dues? Is God really so prodigal with his love and his salvation that he will admit just anyone to this new life regardless? At least let us know where the boundaries are, where it's safe to go and where it's not.

When Jesus was in a dispute with religious leaders who were concerned about such restrictions, he reversed the established order of religion by saying, *'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God heaven ahead of you.'*⁴ On another occasion when he was teaching the crowds he said, *'For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness,*

³ Galatians 1:14,15

⁴ Matthew 21:31

slander.’⁵ God requires a change so deep and radical that only he can do it. We can fiddle on the outside, and pretend everything has changed, but the heart is what needs changing, and that’s just what we can’t do.

Paul affirms this in his first letter to the Corinthians, but from a different angle. *‘Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.’*⁶

When we hear that passage the first thing we tend to notice is the list of wrongdoing. Keep on reading, however, and it says, ‘And this is what some of you used to be’. That’s the point. God loves what is broken. He heals us and makes us whole. God makes saints from sinners by washing them, making them holy, and justifying them in the name of Jesus. That’s the gospel Paul teaches.

So tonight, despite living in this troubled world, on the eve of this Convention of Synod, there is nothing to fear. We have a big job ahead of us, and we want to get it all just right. We can be confident about that, because of Jesus Christ and his salvation.

Just as Paul prayed for the Ephesians, we can also now pray for each other and for ourselves: *‘I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people...’*

Amen.

⁵ Matthew 15:19

⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:9–11