

# Sermon for Proper 10, Year B

## The Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

Like the overture to an opera in hymn-like language, the letter to the Ephesians bursts into overwhelming praise of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all they have done for us, and for all they promise still to do with us and for us. This letter invites us to feast on and celebrate the tremendous difference Christ's presence can make in our lives. We, the members of His Church, are part of God's far-reaching plans for the future of the universe. In Christ, we have received heavenly blessings, past and present, and the greatest blessings still to come; the blessings of creation that are ours each new day, and the blessings of redemption both in time and for eternity.

The benefits of faith in our Lord Jesus aren't just for life's good times. It is in the tough times that faith excels, and we appreciate more than ever the difference our faith can make. The first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians is full of good news for our bad days. We invite those who say there is no good news for any of us in today's world, to read letters like Ephesians, as it shares with us one marvellous item of good news after another. In Christ, God not only thought of you long before you were born, but your Creator also chose you in love to be His own special possession.

This became real for you when, in Baptism, you were marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. A seal is a sign of possession that aims to see you arrive safely at your designated destiny. In Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit offered you an unearned token or seal, marking you for your place in His mansion in heaven. To be chosen by our Lord, to be loved each day so much better than we could ever deserve, brings the atmosphere of heaven into our worship in His holy House and into our daily Christian lives.

A teenager was flipping pages in his Bible when he came across these words that set him on fire for God, words said by Christ to us all: "You did not choose me; I chose you ... to go and bear fruit, the kind of fruit that endures (John 15:16)." Those words made him feel so special. He realised that we belong to Jesus because Jesus chose us. Jesus has

chosen us so that we might pass onto others the wonderful blessings we've all received from Him.

God ascribes immense value to us, His dear people, the members of His Church, as He looks forward to the wonderful things we can still do for Him. St Paul wants us to revel in God's grace, to sing His praises as long as we live, and to keep growing in our appreciation of all the blessings God's grace can bring into our lives. Grace is good things happening to people who feel worthless because of the way others have treated them.

Toward the end of his life, a millionaire was asked by a friend: "What was the happiest time you can remember in your life?" The millionaire replied: "A period of three weeks when I lay in a hospital in a strange city, ill with typhoid fever". His friend was astonished! "Yes", the millionaire continues, "The answer may well surprise you. But the facts are these. There were many ill in that hospital. It was crowded and short of nurses, and we patients were a demanding and grumbling lot. But there was one nurse on our floor who, though overworked and tired, took our complaints with a smile, serving us as if we were royalty. She never entered my room without bringing peace and love with her. It was like being in heaven."

For St Paul, praising, adoring and thanking our triune God for all He has done for us, and promises to still bestow on us, was like being in heaven. Our hope for life everlasting is meant to lift us above the depressing events of the present and so that we never lose focus on the glorious future ahead of us. We can face each and every situation in our lives, confident that nothing can overtake us that Jesus cannot take care of. Hope loves what is still to come, both in this life and the next. We welcome the future because it bears the face of our Lord Jesus.

With magnificent poetry, today's text celebrates the all-surpassing redemption our Lord Jesus has won for us, and invites us to treasure and embrace it with never ending gratitude. There's a hidden agony in the words of today's epistle: "redemption through Christ's blood". They remind us of the cost of our glorious future. Despite Paul's wonderful description of the Christian life, we're reminded that Jesus suffered indescribable agony for us all, instead of us. "It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from an empty way of life ... but with the precious blood of Christ." Redemption means freedom from the curse of the law. "You are not your own. You have been bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Redemption gives new

worth and value to our bodies.

God values us and our bodies so much that no one less than His own dear Son could free us from our slavery to sin. Thus we use our bodies to serve our Saviour, whom “to serve is perfect freedom”.

Rival attractions loomed large in the city of Ephesus when St Paul wrote this positive and uplifting letter to the Ephesians. By comparison, the Christian Church looked insignificant and fragile. Paul wanted them (and us) to see that things are rarely what they seem on the surface. The day would come when the pagan gods in Ephesus would be forgotten, and Christ’s Church would go from strength to strength. The Christian Church is fundamental to God’s plans for the future of the whole universe.

At that time, there were many divisions in society – Jews versus non-Jews, Greeks versus pagans, slaves versus the freed folk. Christ’s coming changed that. Gentiles were eagerly accepted into the Christian Church, as were slaves and other despised minorities. St Paul could write with great enthusiasm: “There is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all (Colossians 3:11).” Scythians were those people who were less civilised than the Greeks, Romans or Jews, but treasured no less by their fellow Christians of other races.

What sin had previously ruptured and torn apart, Christ has begun bringing together in an amazing unity and harmony. Christians of different races and backgrounds now treasured each other in as yet unheard of ways. God always thinks of His Son and His Church inseparably together. God’s amazing plans for the future of all creation will be worked by Christ in His Church. In the end, it is Christ’s opinion of and attitude to His Church that alone counts. His Church is His new creation of a new humanity, a humanity united under Christ, rescued, redeemed and restored by His love. Our attitude to His Church, of which we are indispensable members, must be the same as His.

“Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the Word, so as to present the Church to Himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25b-27).” St Paul then goes on to speak about how Christ

nourishes and tenderly cares for His Church, because we're members of His body.

The Church is the Bride of Christ. No one in the universe will or can stop the marriage between Christ and His Bride. Life together forever with Christ, the Church's Bridegroom, is God's good and gracious desire for us. And that's why we cannot stop praising God as long as we have breath. We were created to glorify God and enjoy God forever. One day that will be possible without any earthly hindrance. Meanwhile, Luther reminds us:

'We are not the ones who can preserve the Church, nor were our forefathers able to do so. Nor will our successors have this power. No, it was, is, and will be He who says, "I am with you, always, to the close of the age." As it says in Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever," and in Revelation 1:8, "He who is and who was and who is to come." This is His name and no one else's; nor may anyone else be called by that name.

A thousand years ago you and I were nothing, and yet the Church was preserved at that time without us. He who is called "who was" and "yesterday" had to accomplish this. ... Our Lord does this so plainly that we could touch and feel it, if we did not want to believe it. We must leave this to Him who is called "who is" and "today." Likewise, we will contribute nothing toward the preservation of the Church after our death. He who is called "who is to come" and "forever" will accomplish it.'

*We are members of His body, / we are people whom He loved,  
He will change us to be like Him / when we see Him face to  
face.*

*We shall live with Him forever / men and angels shout and sing.  
Free salvation has been given / to the family of the King!*

*Hymn 805, vv.3-4*