

Sunday 4 October 2020

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral marking the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Reunification of Germany:

Readings: [Exodus 20.1-4, 7-9, 12-20](#); [Ephesians 1.1-14](#); [Matthew 21.33-46](#)

Each week, a group of people came together to pray for peace in their local church. A place of sanctuary. Each week, people invited others to join them in prayer. Each week, people sang Psalms that reminded them that with God's help they could leap over a wall; reflected on God's promise that the structures that oppress this world will be overcome. Each week, they lit candles as a sign of hope that the darkness might be set ablaze by light. And week by week, the numbers of people kept growing.

Until the church could no longer hold them all. Until there were thousands, with lit candles, filling the city centre outside the church. Calling for the values of heaven—the freedom, dignity and respect of all God's children—to be reflected in the world in which they lived. Week after week people met, with lit candles. Stood praying and singing, as the police looked on and did not know how to react to this wave of light and peace filling the dark winter nights. Until the people had, by their prayer and persistence, leaped over the Wall, toppled it. And East Germany's borders were opened.

The path for Germany to grow together started at Leipzig's Nikolai Church. A church where Bach had been the organist. The church where the peaceful movement started that ultimately led to German reunification thirty years ago this weekend. If you are old enough to have witnessed the dramatic pictures of the Berlin Wall being smashed by people from East and West, you will probably remember exactly where you were that moment. I certainly can remember my tears of joy in my family home, as my divided homeland began to heal and grow together again.

Our faith can change our world. Our courage and community can break down barriers. Just as our persistence and prayer can change people and places. And that's precisely what you and I are called to do.

Change the world by our actions.

Because God's plan is for the rule of heaven to be restored across this broken world.

And each one of us who believe, is called to be part of this plan. And each one of us has been given special gifts to bring God's plan to change our world to pass.

This month we will be reflecting together on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In our services, our sermons, prayers and Bible Studies we will be thinking about God's goodness and grace to us. And as we think about God's gifts to us, we will also reflect together on what it is that God calls us to do with the goodness and grace he has 'lavished upon us' (Ephesians 1.8). What he calls each one of us to do and be, to help change our world for good.

Paul begins his letter by sharing with us God's vision for his creation. He shares with us 'the mystery of God's will' (Ephesians 1.9). God's will is for all people to be reconciled to one another and to him. Paul tells us this mystery at the beginning of his letter to give us the chance to step back from the day to day life of being church, and to look at the world and our

own Christian lives from a broader perspective. Step back from our daily concerns – Melbourne during a global pandemic, the future of our Cathedral ministry after Covid19 – and look at our world in the way God sees it. And today's epistle reading commences to explore the central themes of Paul's letter:

- Who is God?
- What is God's plan for the world?
- And what is our part in this plan?
- What is the nature of God's lavish grace for us?
- And how can we share it with others?

Right at the very beginning of his letter, Paul sets out God's vision for his world. 'Grace to you and peace', Paul writes to the people of Ephesus, 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 1.2). This is not just a lovely phrase that Paul uses to start his letter. Rather, it is the primary purpose of God's plan. The vision that God has for this world is to be filled with grace – the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And for God's people to use those gifts of grace to heal the world, and bring about the gift of peace.

Grace and peace are at the beginning of Paul's letter to invite God's people to share together in being grace-bearers and peace-makers. People who proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. Who draw on the knowledge that God loves us and his lavish gifts of grace, to make and promote peace in our own time and place.

This ministry does not come easily, or naturally, Paul knows. That is why God's people are equipped for their task with 'every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1.3). The abundant gifts of heaven are granted to God's people for the work of bringing grace and peace to the world. Love and joy, peace and forbearance, kindness and goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5.22). The lavish gifts of the Holy Spirit are granted to those God has chosen to bring about God's plan of grace and peace.

It's nice to know that God gives these precious gifts to peace-makers and change-bringers, isn't it? Here's the snag, though: there isn't a group of spiritual super-heroes who will deliver God's plan for the world.

We are God's plan for the world.

You and I. We are the peace-makers and change-bringers.

That is why we need each one of those lavish gifts.

We are given heavenly gifts to help us bring about God's plan for the universe. The plan 'to gather up all things in heaven and earth in Christ' (Ephesians 1.10). God's plan is for each creature to be reconciled to God. God's plan is for each person to know about and experience God's grace. And God's plan needs each one of us, needs all of our gifts.

Because you and I will be the people who invite others into God's friendship and love. You and I will be the people who reflect God's grace and peace in our behaviours and in our relationships. You and I show by the way in which we have built up community here at St

Paul's, how other communities can be changed. How other places and people are changed. Until the whole world is reconciled and healed, transformed and conformed to God's will.

Changing the world is a difficult and arduous task. And I suspect that you'd really like to know that we truly are called to be those peace-makers, and change makers. That's why we are not only given heavenly gifts to equip us for this mission. But we are also given a pledge of our belonging. Those who believe in Jesus Christ, Paul tells us, already fully share in Christ's life. Just as he is the Son of God, we who believe in him, are God's daughters and sons. 'God destined us for adoption as his children', Paul affirms (Ephesians 1.5).

And as a pledge that his vision for our world to be conformed to the will of heaven will be fulfilled in God's time, God gifts us the Holy Spirit.

God's Spirit is who unites each one of us with Christ, binds each one of us to God and God to us. God has bestowed on us gifts of wisdom and insight into his plan for the world to be full of grace and peace. God has destined us for love and forgiveness, redemption and salvation (Ephesians 1.7-8).

God trusts us to share this insight with the world. God charges us to change this world by using the gifts he has given us.

Because that is what we will receive as our inheritance.

We are gifted God's world as our inheritance. The world he made to be very good. So that we may share it, care for it, tend it and transform it.

Until the time when God's plan has been fulfilled, and heaven and earth are again made one in Christ. 'God intends to flood the whole cosmos, heaven and earth together, with his presence and grace'. He does not intend to 'leave earth to rot and making do for all eternity with only one half of his creation' (N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, p. 31-2). God wants our earth to reflect the values of heaven.

In Christ heaven meets earth, Paul tells us.

In our adoption as God's children, we have become Christ's sisters and brothers. Through God's Holy Spirit, each one of us is linked to heaven. Through Christ, each one of us is linked to each fellow believer, the world over. Through each one of us, our world is linked to heaven.

And that is how the world will be changed.

Through each Christian, through each one of us.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians invites each of us to play a part in the healing of this world. Invites each of us to use the lavish gifts God gave us to bring about peace.

And if we – rightly – feel that this task is daunting, Paul assures that the gifts of grace we have already received are sufficient for us to play our part in God's vision for this world.

Because we start at home. With each individual believer.

Our world will be transformed by every changed life: one by one, person by person. Starting with each one of us, with our own lives.

We are God's ambassadors who in our own lives show forth the gifts of grace: one by one, community by community. Starting with each of our congregations.

We are the peacemakers, God places in each community who will show forth the gift of his peace. One by one, place by place. Starting in our Cathedral community and in this city.

When we begin to see the world through God's eyes, we may begin to see the whole universe changed for good.

As each individual is changed, beginning with you and me. As each community is transformed, beginning with our own. As each place is renewed, beginning with this city and church.

This incredible vision is set before us today as a gift and an opportunity. The gift of God's Spirit, of the lavishness of God's grace, to sustain us, comes with the challenge to let our eyes be opened to God's vision for his creation: a world that is cared for by each of us, a world that is prepared for his peace by each one of us.

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When I was a child, my homeland was divided. Half of Germany was locked away behind high fences and walls topped with razor-wire, guarded day and night by army and police. [Ambassador Fitschen just called it one of the harshest and most heavily guarded borders of the world].

When I grew up, I did not believe that I would live to see the day when those powerful instruments of oppression would be toppled, and the two parts grow again together into one united Germany.

Nor would I have believed that this process would be accelerated by a group of parishioners in one Leipzig church, meeting together to pray, sing Psalms and light candles on Monday afternoons.

But that is exactly the mystery of God's will: to change our world, bit by bit. And as God called the church in Leipzig to start a movement of prayer and hope, community and peaceful protest that would topple the Wall, so he calls us today to begin to change the world, starting in our own City.

As we embark on our month's reflection together, I pray that God, the giver of all good things, would pour out the lavish riches of his grace on us and use us in his service. That God would pour his Spirit into our lives and move our hearts to prayer. That God would equip us to recognise our gifts, and move us to good works to build up his kingdom, right here at the heart of Melbourne.

May we be equipped by God's lavish generosity to work together to transform our City and Church. May we, who have placed 'our hope on Christ', find that we have been equipped 'to live for the praise of his glory' (Ephesians 1.12). May we fulfil God's plan that our earth again will reflect the values of heaven.

'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever' (Ephesians 3.20). Amen.