

Count your blessings! Ephesians 1.1-14

*When upon life's
billows you are
tempest tossed,
When you are
discouraged, thinking
all is lost,
Count your many
blessings, name them
one by one,
And it will surprise
you what the Lord
hath done.*



Count your blessings,
name them one by
one —

Count your blessings, see what God has done —
Count your blessings, name them one by one —
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done!

The other night I watched a late-night programme on TV (you know, one of those things you catch when you're too sleepy to switch off and go to bed ...). But this one was really interesting! It was called "*Being Sikh*", one of a series on world faiths (*Being Jewish*, *Being Christian*, and so on) — in which members of different faith communities were invited to explain their faith on camera and get across what it means to them in their daily lives. One thing that struck me was how much we have in common — and the other was how joyful and excited this young couple were at having the chance to explain the naming ceremony for their brand-new baby and how important it was for them to introduce him to prayer and worship as soon almost as soon as he was born. (I also discovered that Sikhs believe that everyone is equal before God, so every Sikh boy, as well as his personal name, bears a name that means "Lion", and every Sikh girl bears a name that means "Princess".)

It reminded me of some words I read in an exhibition at the Cathedral about the work of Dean Bennett, who was Dean of Chester in the 1930s, in a book about children and

faith called (rather quaintly) *Mary Jane and Harry John*. Children, he wrote, learn by imitation and wonder — they start by watching and wondering why a grown-up does this or that — so “all that you need to do at first is to take care that your children see such actions on your part as are expressive of your religion.” “It is more important that a child should imitate actions which are expressive of religious feelings and thus come to wonder and think for himself than that he should learn any amount of pious words.”

But it also made me wonder — what would you or I say if the cameras came round to our house and asked us to explain what’s important and exciting to us about being Christians? How would you sum up the big ideas of the Christian faith in a 10-minute programme?

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints who are [in Ephesus] and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of which is a roundabout way of introducing our new series of *Thought for the Day*. The Epistle to the Ephesians, which we’ll be reading over the next couple of weeks, is a short letter full of big ideas. It’s a letter in which Paul tries to capture something of the awe and majesty of God’s secret plan for humanity and the world — and sometimes (being Paul) gets so involved in long sentences that it’s easy to get lost. It contains some of the most famous passages in the Bible — and some of the most controversial!

When was it written? It’s connected with the later years of Paul’s life, when he was in prison (3.1). Many of Paul’s letters (like 1 Corinthians, which we read last year) are written to particular churches with particular problems. Ephesians is different. It doesn’t mention any specific problem or situation — it reads more like a general manifesto, a summary of Paul’s life’s work as the apostle to the Gentiles. There’s quite a bit of overlap with another short letter, Colossians — so much so that some have questioned whether Paul actually wrote this himself or one of his staff team. And there are good reasons to think that it wasn’t originally addressed to Ephesus alone, but was a circular letter that was sent out by messenger to a number of churches, with a blank in the opening address where the messenger would fill in the name of the church he was speaking to (see the footnotes on v.1). It might even be the missing “Letter from Laodicea” mentioned in Colossians 4.16!

Whatever its origins, Ephesians is a gem of an Epistle — well worth reading and pondering! It’s a magnificent summary of the “big ideas” of the Christian faith — a

grand sweeping overview of what it meant to Paul and his newly-founded churches in the first century to be living as “Easter people” — and what it means to us today. Let me just pick out three words — three B’s — from this opening section (which is all one sentence in the original Greek!).

BLESSED: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places ...

Paul starts (as he starts almost all his letters) with an explosion of praise and thanksgiving. “Thank God for YOU”, is where he normally starts (that comes in tomorrow’s reading) — but first, “Thank God for JESUS!”. The very first word (after the greeting) is “Blessed” — and look how it comes three times in v.3. I was reading this out in the garden last week, sitting in the sun on almost the first day it’s been warm enough to sit out — and (like Paul) I got caught up in that word “Blessed” and couldn’t get past it. Sometimes we’re so busy looking for things to worry about (and yes, I know there are plenty of those) that we forget how much we have to be thankful for. Basking in God’s blessings is not about being smug or self-satisfied — it’s just about turning our faces outward and upward to the sun in thankfulness and trust. “Counting your blessings,” in the words of the old hymn, is not a bad place to start the week!

BELOVED: He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

One of the great themes of Ephesians is that there is *a plan for the fulness of time* — what Paul calls *the mystery of God’s will* (v.9). Years ago, I was in a cinema settling down to watch *The Railway Children* (yes, *that* long ago!). Feel-good family entertainment, you might think — but the opening sequence, when the dad gets arrested and taken off to jail, is very dark and scary. I knew the story well, but behind me were some children who obviously didn’t know how it was going to turn out. “Is it going to be OK?” asked a little voice — and then settled down to enjoy the story when she knew it was. She didn’t need to know the details — just that it was going to be all right in the end. Robin reminded us yesterday that we’re living in a story where we don’t know what’s going to happen — but we do know it’s going to be OK. We don’t know the details, and there’ll be some surprises and testings along the way — but yes, God’s got this.

And it’s a plan that has love at its heart. At the heart of the universe — at the heart of

everything — is Jesus, God’s beloved Son: so if you just say *the Beloved*, you’ve said all that matters. He’s the source of the blessings God has lavished upon us: redemption, forgiveness, the riches of his grace (v.7). All big ideas which we’ll explore a little more as we go forward — but the key word that holds them all together is love. The Father loves the Son. But it’s not the exclusive kind of family love that shuts out everyone else: God wants to include us in that love by *adopting us into the family* (v.5). John puts it brilliantly in his first Epistle: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Beloved, we are God’s children NOW; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we shall be like him: for we shall see him as he is.* (1 John 3.2)

BELIEF: In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

Big ideas can be scary if we feel we’re being asked to believe things we don’t understand. But *pistis*, the Greek word for “belief” or “faith” also means “trust” and “loyalty” — and that’s fundamentally a heart thing as much as a head thing. For me, one of the most moving moments, in last week’s coverage of Prince Philip’s life, was the footage from the Coronation where the Queen’s young husband kneels at her feet and places his hands between hers as a gesture of loyalty to the Sovereign (and then kisses her gently on the cheek as a pledge of the lifelong love and support that he offered her). *Pistis* covers all those things — the loyalty and obedience that we owe to the Sovereign of the universe; the love we offer to the king of our hearts; and the gesture itself, the pledge or “seal” of a deeper truth that is beyond our understanding. Think of the Holy Spirit, God’s gentle breath in our lives, as a kiss on the cheek, a tiny, tangible pledge that the love that undergirds the universe is there to support us, all through our lives.

God bless,
Loveday

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