

26th March, 2023

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If

safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service.

If you have access to worship music, choose a song and

listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name – the Lord, the mighty one.



The Good Shepherd
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
To children's children and for evermore!

The Sermon by Timothy James: Growing larger ... through mission.

Read Ephesians 3:1-13, Matthew 28:16-20

I love the way the Bible, while being 66 books, is at the same time one book. It tells many stories, and it tells one story.

These two passages from very different books, when you dig into them, are linked by a mystery. Remember that the books of the Bible were not written in the order we have them printed: Matthew's gospel was probably written after AD 70, and Paul's letter was probably written before that, in about AD 62. But they were both based on a common source, the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, who had known Jesus, heard his teaching and witnessed his resurrection.

The Matthew passage is the final scene of the movie, the ending of the last act of the play, the last line of the book. A good writer chooses his last line carefully. It should sum the whole thing up – “what next?”. That is exactly what this passage does: Jesus tells the eleven what is supposed to happen next.

As for Ephesians, Paul loves the word “mystery”. He uses it 21 times, which is 60% of the times it is used in the Bible; five times in Ephesians alone. What does it mean?

A mystery religion in the Roman empire was a (usually Eastern) cult whose members were initiated by being given a secret word, symbol or ritual. Christians were often seen by pagans as initiates in a mystery cult. Their symbol was sometimes seen as a fish; their ritual apparently involved bread and wine.

Paul's mystery (v.6), the secret for initiates into the faith, is that, rather than being limited to his people Israel, God's promises were for the gentiles. There is another word we need to understand, then, namely “gentiles”. Unfortunately, we simply read this word to mean “not a Jew”. What it really means is, one of those people who appeared to be outside the scope of God's promises, unless you listened to them really carefully.

The story of the Hebrew scriptures is how God chose a man, a family and a people from among all the world's population to fulfil his purpose in putting right what went wrong when sin came into the world. All around this chosen people were all the other peoples who had not been chosen – “the nations”. They are often, almost universally, seen in Israel's scriptures as hostile, a threat to God's people, to be beaten down under their feet, humiliated or annihilated. At best, the most optimistic idea was they would eventually come to wonder at Israel's God and bow down in awe at what he had done for his people.

Paul says that the mystery which has now been revealed is that the promises God made to his chosen people were for the whole world, and that this had always been his intention. God's promises start with his promise to Abram in Gen. 12: 1-3, that in him “all the families of the earth” would be blessed.

“So Abram went, as the LORD had told him”; and the story begins!

So,

- God promises blessing to all the families of the earth, and creates a special people to embody, enable and deliver that blessing.

- Jesus, born from that chosen people, commissions the apostles to make disciples of “all nations” (Matt 28: 16-20).
- Paul is called to be the apostle to the gentiles – that’s what he calls himself repeatedly, and what he declares in vv.8-9.
- Result: the gospel of salvation is for his Ephesian listeners, and for us.

So, what God was doing by saving Israel (from Egypt) and being present with them (in the wilderness, in the Temple), is seen to have been a foreshadowing of what he would do by saving and being present with everybody. The whole OT message becomes clear!

And it turns out we are on the receiving end of the story that started in Genesis 12.

We are gentiles. We were seen as outside God’s promises; but the promise was for us from the very beginning (vv.9, 11): we were to be brought into the light (Isa. 49:6), grafted on (Rom. 11), adopted (Gal. 4:5). The mystery is implicit in the Great Commission and in Old Testament prophecy.

Well, this is all very good news, but what are we to do about it, other than be very happy? In other words, what now?

The commission is for us: Paul makes that clear in v.10 “so the through the church the wisdom of God ... might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”.

Why was this important in Ephesus? “This means the gentiles; so it means you”.

Why is it important in Four Marks? “This means you; so it means everybody”.

Our mission as a church community in a Hampshire village: if this good news includes us, it includes our neighbours. How can we keep it from them? Like the four lepers in II Kings 7:9 who discovered that the army besieging Samaria had run away, we need to say “This is a day of good news; ... therefore let us go and tell”.

We are perhaps inclined to think that making disciples of “all nations” means foreign missions. No – we are “the nations”. It means people here.

Practical advice I have gathered about fulfilling the Great Commission of Matthew 28 includes:

1. Begin with prayer.
2. Make disciples, not just converts (“teaching them to do what I have commanded”). Aim to expand the Kingdom.
3. Be ready to share your testimony (I Pet.3:15).
4. Work in groups.
5. Build relationships.
6. Fulfil practical needs;; and 7. Rely on the Holy Spirit (“I am with you”).

I have concentrated on the theology, not practical tips, because (a) I’m not an expert and (b) the theology lasts longer. Methods change as we and the world change. But the mission, the message and the mystery do not change: this is for all time, until the end of the age (that is, the age of the church, which runs from the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost to the return of Jesus). They provide our agenda. We have inherited the apostles’ testimony, and the understanding that the promises are for us, and not only us. We cannot keep this to ourselves.

Prayers: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:4-6)*



- Pray for this day, and the coming week.
- Pray for justice, mercy, peace, and hope.
- Pray for individuals, neighbours, and for family & friends.
- Pray for the Church.

Collect: Fifth Sunday of Lent. Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer: *Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

The Notices: We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- **Next week is Palm Sunday**
- Tea and Chat & Bowls: Wed. 19th April at 2pm, Church Hall and Church.
- Coffee and Questions: 26th April at 11am in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise for Easter, 3pm Sunday April 2nd.
- COGS Tots: 2nd Mondays. COGS Tinytots: Monday mornings.
- Messy Church: Second Sundays of the month.