

Year B

Ephesians 3:14-21

Our Bible reading in Ephesians today takes us to the heart of Paul's sermon to the Ephesians, for that is surely what it is. All good sermons are prayers - for there is the implicit recognition in the preacher's words that all is offered to God on behalf of the people. Here we have a beautiful offering from the apostle Paul.

The text begins with the words "for this reason" and as the lectionary has omitted the previous verses we would be quite right

to ask the question - for what reason? For what reason does Paul bow before his heavenly Father? Well, looking back at the earlier chapters we learn that the great mystery that God was now revealing related to the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. And their inclusion was on exactly the same basis as the Jews - the undeserved love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. The Gentiles were not admitted to God's family via the back door. Their's is not a second class citizenship but instead they are welcomed as brothers and sisters, for this is the family of God. Paul began the

text this week with, “for this reason I bow my knees before the Father (pater), from who every family (patria) in heaven and on earth takes its name. The word ‘patria’ is rare in the New Testament. Normally it means tribe or lineage, but here it has the extended sense of family. All descended, so to speak, from the Father. And so Paul will argue strongly, as he expands his thinking through Ephesians, that there cannot be two families of the one God. There is only one family and so do not try to segregate or discriminate. If you do that you will tell the world a lie about the nature of your God, who is one. There is

no 'us' and 'them' in God's family. This was the mystery that is now being revealed to the world and it has life changing implications for all who are willing to take it seriously.

If you have ever read the Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling or seen the films you will know about the cupboard under the stairs.

If you haven't read the books or seen the films the cupboard under the stairs was Harry Potter's room in the Dursley household until he was given Dudley Dursley's old room, at 4 Privet Drive in Little Whinging, Surrey. The cupboard was described as small and dusty, with lots of

spiders. When Harry's mother and father were killed, Harry was brought to his maternal aunt, Petunia Dursley. She and her husband reluctantly took him in, but treated him poorly, mostly because his parents had been magical and they feared that Harry would also turn out to be like them. Instead of being given a real bedroom, Harry was kept in the cupboard under the stairs. Harry's cousin Dudley was roughly the same age and used to jump up and down on top of these stairs so sawdust would fall onto Harry. The Dursleys' fears about Harry being magical turned out to be correct, as

Harry received an invitation to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The first letter was addressed: Mr H Potter The Cupboard under the stairs. This prompted the Dursleys to allow Harry to move into what had previously been Dudley's second bedroom. Despite the Dursleys' numerous attempts to prevent Harry from accepting the offer, he soon went to Hogwarts. As Harry left 4 Privet Drive for the last time, he took a look inside the cupboard, which was now being used to store stacked shoes and umbrellas.

The fascinating world of Harry Potter is in some senses a reflection of the way we live our lives. As we get drawn into a fine tale, so we hear things that resonate with us and should disturb us. The Dursleys are comic characters in the books but there is a darkness about them that makes us feel uncomfortable because we all too readily identify with the desire to bury some things, or some people, in the cupboard under the stairs!

For Paul, that's exactly what some Jewish believers in Jesus Christ were doing whether consciously or not. And we mustn't diminish

how difficult it would be for them to accept this newly revealed mystery. They had a complex system of rules and regulations that had been adapted over the years to reflect the new circumstances that the people found themselves in. They were a very adaptable people and they had survived some very great traumas. They were not going to very readily dispense with these securities and identify markers for the sake of including peoples and races who had previously persecuted them. That was very understandable. Paul needed to progress carefully with them. How was he going to do

that? - by praying for them. Prayer changes those being prayed for and it changes the one who prays.

CS Lewis was the author of the widely read children's books, *The Narnia Chronicles*, as well as many novels for grown-ups and books on issues surrounding the Christian faith. The movie *Shadowlands* (directed by Richard Attenborough and produced in 1993) told Lewis' story, focusing in particular on his relationship with his wife, Joy Gresham. Gresham and Lewis meet while Lewis was a don at Oxford University.

After Joy was diagnosed with cancer the couple married. The movie invited us to witness their love, their pain, their grief, their struggles with faith and God. Eventually Joy died.

At one point in the story a friend said to Lewis, “Christopher can scoff, Jack, but I know how hard you’ve been praying; and now God is answering your prayers.”

Lewis replied; “That’s not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and

sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me.”

Paul had been gifted the revelation of the mystery of God, that God was for the world and not just the Jewish people. For that gift to be handed on Paul had to be convinced of it himself and he had to set about convincing his own people. Jesus told the story of two sons and their father. The youngest son wanted to live life to the full and to live it now. He didn't want to wait on the good things so he asked for his inheritance from his father now. It was a shameful thing to do but his father granted his wish. Off he

went and squandered the money until in his deprivation and despair he came back to his father. Instead of refusing to receive him his father welcomed him back joyfully with open arms. But here comes the telling part of the story. The older brother, the other son, was disgusted. Disgusted with his wee brother and therefore disgusted with his father. This story which we know as the parable of the Prodigal Son would have been penned shortly after the apostle Paul wrote Ephesians. But it is of the same era and context.

Inclusion is important to God. It demands a change of mind and a change of life for those who are being challenged to receive it. The Jewish struggled with it and we must not kid ourselves that we find it any easier because one of the tragedies of the human condition is that we are very good also at condemning some people to live in the cupboard under the stairs. We must not tolerate that kind of behaviour but instead we must comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ. Amen.