

Sermon: In Christ

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Jan. 2, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you know that, in Christ, you are valued, treasured and loved by God? Did you know that, in Christ, God has called you by name, and has pre-ordained you for salvation, even before the foundation of the world was laid? Did you know that, in Christ, you have been chosen, gathered, and transformed to be the people of God? Did you know that, in Christ, God has a plan for you, a plan for your wellbeing, a plan for your prosperity, a plan for you to shine like a lighthouse on top of a hill?

I did, and I do still, with a caveat that none of these make sense without Christ, none of these were true apart from Christ.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, on this second Sunday after Christmas in the Christian calendar, some have called it the Epiphany Sunday, it is customary to preach on the light of Christ appearing in the night sky, as in the Gospel of Matthew, or the light of Christ became known as the Word became flesh, as in the Gospel of John.

However, today, I would like to focus on the Ephesian text, written by the Apostle Paul to the Church in Ephesus. But before that, I would like to tell you a bit about myself.

Ever since when I was a little boy, I have this inkling inside that I am chosen and beloved by God, that I have an intimate connection with Christ Jesus. Perhaps it was my Christian upbringing at home, or perhaps it was taught to me during Sunday school at church (I can't be sure), but I came to see myself as having a personal relationship with God in Christ. Whenever I was scared, I prayed to God for protection. Whenever I was lost, I prayed to Christ for direction.

One time, when I was 8 or 9 year-old, I was swimming in the Pacific Ocean along the northern coast of Taiwan, I was caught by an undercurrent of a retreating tide, dragged further and further away from the shore. I cried out to my family but was too far to be heard. I tried to swim back but was getting too exhausted. So in my desperation, I called out to Jesus. Almost immediately and miraculously, I felt a warm surge of sea water enveloping

me, sending me gently back to the shore, back to safety. I kid you not, that is how I remember the event, and how I have testified to it till this day.

There are probably a number of perfectly logical explanations of what I encountered that day, but all pale in comparison to the hand of God that brought me back from a certain drowning end. What I want to convey to you is that ever since early on in my childhood, I was 'imprinted' with a strong sense that I am special before God, and I've live my life accordingly.

If you get a chance to talk to my wife, Daisy, whom I've known ever since were little children playing together (as she was literally my next door neighbour in Taiwan), and who has known me the longest and the most. She would undoubtedly know the imprinting that I am referring to, and would agree with the assessment that it has made me who I am today, confident and perhaps a tad bit arrogant in claiming God's special love.

Now, there were other encounters, other events that reinforced that imprinting, and together they brought me along the path in life, that has led me to serve the Lord God willingly and wholeheartedly.

I think that is what Apostle Paul was trying to do with the church that gathered in the city of Ephesus, to imprint them not with miraculous powers, but with his most persuasive written words, of how much they are beloved by God, how special they are before the Lord. After his customary greeting in the initial address to the congregation, Paul then opened with,

“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.” (Ephesians 1:4)

The church in Ephesus was gathered by Paul during one of his missionary journeys to the Asia Minor. It seems to be an important base of operation for Paul, as he spent at least two years there and wrote a number of letters to various churches from Ephesus.

The city itself was located on the coast of Ionia, in present day Turkey. It was famed in antiquity for a number of impressive buildings, including the Library of Celsus, a theatre capable of holding 24,000 spectators, and the Temple of Artemis, later designated as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

According to chapter 19 of the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul first arrived at the city, he spent three months in a Jewish synagog, preaching the kingdom of God. After some initial success, he soon faces stiff

resistance from his opponents, using character assassination and blasphemy regarding Christianity, his new found faith in Christ which at the time was called “the Way”. Paul then moved his missionary activities to the lecture hall belonging to a philosopher, Tyrannus. According to verse 10, “This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”

It is important to note that when Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, later from his jail cell in Rome, he was addressing that mixture of Jews and Greeks, or more precisely those recently converted Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. In the time when books of the New Testament were written, that dividing line between Jews and Greeks ran deep. Putting them together in one room is like the modern equivalent of putting the Yankees and the Commies together, or the more recent example of putting the Neo-Nazis and Antifa supporters together. I know, I know, these are just silly labels that I am cobbling together, but the point that I want to make is stressing how difficult of a job it was for Paul to form a cohesive community of faith out of the Jews and the Greeks.

Their pathos, or how they receive words, messages and how they could be persuaded, are quite different. To this mixture, Paul has this to say about God in verse 4-5,

“Just as [God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.
He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will”.

The language of ‘to choose’ or ‘to destine’ would be familiar to the Jewish mindset. They had long held themselves as descendants of Abraham, covenanted and set-apart by God. However, note that Paul was not talking about the bloodline of Abraham, or how the Gentiles are now grafted onto the lineage of Abraham, the so-called ‘father of nations’. Paul was talking about God, the father of all and the creator of all.

In his view, both the Jews and the Greeks are now, in Christ, adopted as children through Christ. This adoption process is not of their own choosing, as most adopted children really don’t get a say, but mere recipients according the good pleasure of their new parents’ grace.

Yet, what a grace it is to the fullest of measure, as Paul explains and lists all its many benefits.

In Christ, we have redemption through his blood.
In Christ, we have forgiveness of our trespasses.
In Christ, the mystery of God's will is made known to us.
In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance, or to be more precise,
to share the inheritance with Jesus.
In Christ, we are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit,
when we first heard and believed
in the good news of Jesus Christ.

Seven times in this opening passage alone of this letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul imprinted the phrase 'in Christ', as none of these grandiose claims would make sense without Christ or apart from Christ. But, in Christ, all of these are tied together in a neat summary, that we have now become the people of God, in Christ.

Therefore, there is no longer Jews or Greeks, men or women, liberal or conservatives, urban or rural, blue collar or white collar, reformed or orthodox, vexer or anti-vexer, black or white or yellow or red, upper or middle or lower class. It doesn't matter if you are Scots or Brits, or French or Malawians or Taiwanese or Canadian. It doesn't matter if you come from a long line of minister's family, or that you are the 7th generations of Christians, or you may have only recently accepted Jesus,

Faith in Christ is the great equalizer that breaks down the dividing walls of hostility. In Christ, all these man-made lines of division are no more. Faith in Christ is the great elevator that lifts us out of the muck, of an unkind society that seems to beat us down with a most ungracious doctrine of the survival of the fittest. We are all valued, treasured and beloved by God. Adopted, yes, but now heirs together with Christ for an inheritance that is incorruptible, for a love that is unconditional and everlasting.

So maybe my childhood inkling wasn't too far off, except I no longer think in the singular sense, but in the collective, no longer the 'I' but now the 'we'. As Apostle Paul once imprinted on the Ephesians, and would undoubtedly do so again onto us all: We are the people of God, in Christ and we live for the praise of God's glory. So, if you are looking for a New Year resolution, to do or to be, I got one for you: be in Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.