

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2015.  
Lectionary Readings: 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3: 14-21, John 6: 1-21.

## **True Worship**

“For this reason...” (Ephesians 3:14) Paul kneels in prayer before God. Why should he be so astounded, and be, as the hymn (217) puts it “lost in wonder, love and praise”? What is it that has moved him to worship?

What is it, I wonder, that moves you to praise and adoration?

Your minds may go to various things. Mine goes to mountains and seas, like the gospel for today.

I can remember taking a bunch of school-children on a trip to Wilpena Pound in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia. After a long drive through the mid-north of South Australia, we caught sight of the Pound in the distance. Conversation and skylarking stopped as we took it in. Then we found a place to pitch tents, had an evening meal and watched the glorious sun-set. Being in the circle of the Pound with mountains around us was awe-inspiring.

The next day was even more. We climbed up to the top of St Mary's Peak, a craggy ascent. From there we could see, not only into the Pound from its highest point, but out across the range to the north-west and the inland seas that are part of the Lake Eyre system. Across to the north-east was Leigh Creek where brown coal was being mined. We stopped and stared at the wonderful spectacle that was unfolding before us in all directions. Some-one quoted words from a song (76) written a long time ago: “I to the hills will lift my eyes: where shall I find my help? My help comes from the Lord who made the earth and heavens.”

Then, also, the wonderful spectacle of the night sky so far from the any artificial light with every star shining clear and the marvellous stretch of the Milky Way Galaxy and the glimpse of nearby galaxies beyond hinting at the vastness of space and time. Every night we were struck with awe. We also felt how small and insignificant we were over against the vastness. That brought us to our knees too. We, for a moment at least, began to comprehend “what is the breadth and length and height and depth” of the majesty of God. We worshipped.

God be praised for such occasions and reasons for worship.

The wonders of nature provide a rationale for worship. But what was Paul's rationale for worship?

To find out, we go back to Ephesians 2:14-15: “For he is our peace, in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.” This is Paul's “mountain-top” experience.

That's the reason. We are talking about divisions. There have been years of divisions, walls between one group and another. Jews and Gentiles, In the church, divisions between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. We have to hear the news again and again. The wall has been broken down! We are called to live in peace because Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.

We have to go back to our beginnings, says Paul. Back to creation where God created every family in heaven and on earth. The peace-making and unity in the church is like a return to the first days of creation when there were no walls, no tags, no divisions due to race, class or creed. Our point of origin is one humanity and our destination is one humanity.

For this reason we are grasped with wonder at the thought “Can we appropriate the fact that a fresh new day has already dawned on the human race?”

We don't say that one day God *will* or *ought* to heal our divisions. Like Paul we affirm that Christ has already done that healing. From the cross Christ reached out and embraced all, forgave all, loved all. It is done.

What is not yet done, however, is that we have failed to grasp the full significance of what Christ has done. The reaching out, the embracing, the forgiving, the loving has to be embodied in the life of the church and in every community. In this activity we clarify and grasp what the significance of the cross is. So we fall on our knees as it dawns on us just how great is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, when we make the effort to do as he does.

In the story of the loaves and fish (John 6:1-21) Jesus, on the mountain, puts the question to the disciples about buying bread for the large crowd, and in so doing is inviting the disciples to make the effort to be the miracle-workers, a transition they are not yet ready to make. So a little boy has to show the way by sharing what he has. Each one of the crowd then is led to share and when they do share, the miracle happens. Breadth, length, height and depth is revealed in sharing.

The bread is linked to the Passover feast and the entry into a new future where they immediately reach the "land toward which they were going." The fish becomes the symbol of the early Christian church, which is also indicated by the "twelve filled baskets."

So we come to worship. We come today. Yet sometimes it also dawns on us as it must have done to the Ephesian community that we still have signs of the perpetuation of the old boundaries, the old tags and divisions and distinctions in which we were brought up and in which we were inculcated by our society or parents or friends.

Old affronts, ancient grudges and hardened prejudices can easily get aroused in us by some small event or expression. Someone is angry because of some hurt, someone has succeeded while another has not done well. Sometimes we are not conscious of the boundaries and walls lying deep within us until some catalyst brings it to the surface.

It is for these reasons that sometimes we get off-key in our singing, or our praise rings a little hollowly and our prayers skim the surface. We find we are not quite ready for worship, for we are still trapped in the old world of divisions. We're not yet big enough to praise a God whose love is so broad and long high and deep as the love of Christ.

Paul Eckel, in commenting on this passage in *Interpretation* has written:

"In this time when wars and rumours of wars abound, when hostilities are deepened because the economy is depressed, when the facts of our lives would lead us to conclude that there are irreconcilable differences among those who call upon the same God, when little minds continue to claim that they alone know the dimensions and limits of Christ's compassion, a preacher would do well to attend to this text, tracing Paul's reason back to the foundation of the world when without distinction God destined, in love, every family in heaven and on earth to be God's children through Jesus Christ."

"The proclamation of this truth, which flies in the face of the facts of our lives, invites all who hear to trust that the one whose love is beyond comprehension, yet made known in Jesus Christ, is the same one who is at work in us, doing far more abundantly than all we ask or think."

So I pray, and you also will pray, that we may, in our mountain-tops, valleys and seas, "have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" so that we "may be filled with all the fullness of God."