

**“In the New Year, Praise?” a sermon based on Ephesians 1:3-14 and John 1:10-18 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 3 January 2021.**

I like the music where you hear an initial theme, the sequence of a few notes, and then from time to time it reappears throughout the piece, anchoring the music, developing movement, holding it together. As we enter 2021, I wonder what that theme is for you. For the writer of Ephesians it is blessedness: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing ...” Addressed to the church at Ephesus, but like a circular letter for every congregation at every time. The writer is captivated by blessedness, so captivated that the first part of the letter is one long sentence with clause after clause, as if it is to be read breathlessly, without interruption, not as our Bibles have it with full stops, as blessing is added to blessing, this, then this, then this as one blessing after another piles on, rolling on, washing over us, carrying us forward, telling us of how much our lives are affected by God with us, the water we swim in, the air we breathe, the sequence of notes that just keep sounding in life.

Something like this ... God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be made whole before God in love; destined us for adoption as God’s children through Jesus Christ, redeemed and forgiven according to God’s grace lavished on us; making known to us the mystery of God’s will, as a plan for the fulfilment of time, to gather up all things in Christ; bequeathing us a destiny, a purpose, to live for the praise of God; to hear the word of truth, the gospel of our saving, marked with a seal, an absolute assurance of the Holy Spirit, towards our redeeming as God’s own people for the praise of God. No wonder preachers have gone clause by clause, meticulously explaining one after the other, unpicking and exploring each thread. John is more succinct - “From the fulness of Christ we have all received, grace upon grace.”

If blessedness is a theme for life, we will keep finding it. In the music of creation, we will keep hearing the sequence, if we pause to listen. There is a marvellous writer who in her novels constantly points to signs of blessedness. I have just finished reading her latest novel Jack. Her name is Marilynne Robinson. If you read her Pulitzer-prize winning novel, Gilead, then you know that she is on the lookout for the blessedness that lurks in the everyday. Along those lines, she thinks that the person who invented the garden sprinkler did something far lovelier than just provide an easy way to water grass. Because sprinklers expose water droplets to sunlight, and in that shimmering moment, we see each drop not as the stuff we use to do the dishes or mop the kitchen floor. No, we see that each drop is really a jewel, a mini-cathedral, as the light refracts to expose the dazzling rainbow that surrounds us. The essence of light and water is revealed in the self-same moment, and it reminds us of the glory that engulfs us daily, though we often miss it. “We have seen his glory,” John wrote. And he also wrote that the glory of that One is often missed. “He came to that which was his own and his own received him not.”

Now I am not speaking about being annoyingly and artificially positive, of cloying optimism. Christianity does not pretend there is no darkness. I am speaking of what underpins our living, of a spirit that is as deep in grieving as in thanking, in lament as in gratitude. Nor am I speaking of what we might naturally think of as blessing. Many have a long list. But there are others whose life seems far from blessed, people who suffer one thing after another, people dying from hunger and thirst, people whose families have been killed in war, people trapped in refugee camps. To speak of their lives as blessed seems cruel. Ephesians speaks of blessedness as cosmic and communal, and points to what is shared, to our creation and destiny, to our identity and being chosen, to our redemption as humankind, to what we are promised and which we are called to share. Blessedness is not for us to possess but to live into for the sake of the world. And it is not to sit up there, out there somewhere, although the concepts are strange to us, not our everyday language. So we have to unpack them.

In that sense, then, these clauses can be prompts for us, invitations to meditate, to wonder about, to watch for, to notice the droplets on our garden leaves. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be made whole before God in love. Destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, redeemed and forgiven according to God's grace lavished on us. Making known to us the mystery of God's will, as a plan for the fulfilment of time, to gather up all things in Christ. Bequeathing us a destiny, a purpose, to live for the praise of God. To hear the word of truth, the gospel of our saving, marked with a seal, an absolute assurance of the Holy Spirit, towards our redeeming as God's own people for the praise of God.

Sitting with those words, with a candle lit, a cup of coffee, maybe with a bowl of water alongside, pondering what they might mean for each of us, about not just us, naming people for whom we pray that they might sense what these words might mean for them. Here is music we can listen for, a theme that sounds through our everyday lives, even when the music seems silent.

Martin Rinkart became the minister of the small German town of Eilenberg in 1618 just as the slaughter and chaos of the Thirty Years War was beginning. This was a period so catastrophic that the population of Germany fell from 16 million to 6 million over thirty years. Eilenberg was a walled city. It became a crowded haven for political and military refugees. This left the city vulnerable to disease and famine. In the year 1637 there was a terrible plague. Martin Rinkart was the only minister remaining in Eilenberg. He conducted 4000 funerals in that year, including up to 50 funerals a day. As the signs of peace began to emerge and the tide of slaughter, famine and plague began to recede in the 1640s, Martin Rinkart, who had lost half his household, including his wife, and could have been forgiven for feeling resentful, angry and unforgiving, sat down and wrote one of the most famous hymns in the German language which we know in English as "Now thank we all our God". Viewing the wreckage of war, and the folly of his fellow human beings, he nonetheless still saw the ultimate grace of God, which had given him life, had given him Jesus, had given him hope, had given him unlikely friends, and still gave him faith. He did the simple thing and just said thank you. Martin Rinkart was a person in whom the glory of God was revealed. And it was revealed through his ability and willingness, even amid untold suffering, to say thank you to the God of wonder and glory, who created us all, who suffers in our suffering, and who alone can raise us to new life. "From the fulness of God we have all received, grace upon grace."

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