

EPHESIANS

**The Letter of Paul
to Gentile Christians**

With the coming of the spring of 57 and the opening of the sailing season, Paul prepared to set off for Jerusalem with the delegates from the various churches in Macedonia and Achaia, to deliver the collection to the needy communities in Judea. He planned to go by boat but, as Luke tells us: ‘Paul was about to set sail for Syria when a plot was made against him by the Jews, and so he decided to return through Macedonia’ (Acts 20:3). On the likely assumption that Luke himself is the author of the travel diary, he was among those whom Paul met when he arrived in Philippi (Acts 20:5), and when Paul left Philippi, Luke followed him to Troas and from there travelled with Paul and the others to Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that Paul was taken prisoner and transferred to Caesarea. The Roman governor, Felix, made no attempt to set up a proper tribunal to hear the case against Paul, partly in the hope that ‘money would be given him by Paul’ (Acts 24:26). The result was that Paul spent two years in Caesarea under a form of house arrest. For reasons which will be expounded shortly, it is possible that the so-called ‘Letter to the Ephesians’ was composed during Paul’s stay in Caesarea.

Before reflecting on the text of Ephesians we need to look at the question of authorship. Though Paul is named as the author, this has been questioned in modern times and the majority of scholars today are of the opinion that it is written by someone other than Paul. In the introductory chapter, we looked at what it might mean for a faithful disciple of Paul to write in Paul’s name, and we saw that there are no serious objections in principle to such a practice. Many of those who hold the opinion that Paul is not the author base their arguments on the content of the letter. It seems to me that their arguments are not soundly based. As I hope to show, the ideas that are special to Ephesians are not only consistent with Paul’s thought but express a number of his central convictions. He does develop a number of his thoughts here, but don’t we all? Some argue against Pauline authorship because of the number of words that are found in Ephesians which are not found in any of his other letters. This, however, can be satisfactorily explained by the unique nature of this letter - a subject to which we shall return shortly. There is also the fact that there are many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. Some explain these similarities by arguing that a later author borrowed heavily from Colossians. The connections between Colossians and Ephesians, however, are also explainable without denying Pauline authorship.

One thing seems clear: the letter we are about to analyse is not written specifically to the Ephesians. The traditional title of this letter comes from the fact that most ancient manuscripts include Ephesus in the address. However our earliest papyrus codex (P⁴⁶) and two of the most important fourth century parchment codexes (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) make no mention of Ephesus. From the contents of the letter itself it is clear that it is not addressed by the apostle Paul directly to the community in Ephesus among whom he had worked for three years. It lacks any personal memories. He says that he has ‘heard’ about their faith and love (1:15): an expression used also in his letter to the Colossians (1:4) who were evangelised by Epaphras and not by Paul. When speaking of his own apostolic commission, he writes: ‘Surely you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you’ (3:2). These words would sound strange to a community who had experienced Paul’s preaching for such a long period.

Likewise, when speaking of Christ, he writes: ‘Surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus’ (4:21). Had he been writing to Ephesus he would surely have reminded them of what he himself had taught them. The Anchor Bible commentary on Colossians by M. Barth and H. Blanke (1994), referring to the similarities and differences between Ephesians and Colossians (in subject matter, vocabulary and style) concludes: ‘At about the same time, but in addressing different congregations in different situations, one and the same author wrote both letters’ (page 114). The author in their opinion is Paul. If he did in fact compose Colossians and Ephesians at the same time, this could point to his composing this letter in Ephesus in the middle fifties. Paul asked the Colossians: ‘when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea’ (Colossians 4:16). ‘Ephesians’ may even be the letter referred to as the ‘letter from Laodicea’. Marcion, writing in the second century, identifies it as such. I prefer to think of Paul writing this letter from Caesarea as a farewell gift to the Gentile churches in the east. The two years of his imprisonment there provides just the right situation for this letter.

There remains, however, the most serious objection to Pauline authorship: the style. Everyone agrees that the style in which Ephesians is written is significantly different from the style of any of the other Pauline letters. On this criterion, Jean-Noël Aletti, without being dogmatic on the issue, comes to the conclusion that it is more probable that the author is not Paul (Saint Paul, *Epître aux Ephésiens*, 2001, page 32). However, a number of observations may be in order. The first is the fact that students were schooled in practising different styles as part of their education. The second is that Ephesians is unique among Paul’s letters and in such a way that a different style could well be expected. All Paul’s other letters are written to specific churches. Paul is involved in controversy, defence, and the cut and thrust of argument. He is also concerned with the problems and questions of particular churches. If, as we suggest, Ephesians is a general letter written to Gentile churches in the east, it is free from these characteristics. Since it is a more reflective (we might say prayerful) letter, that in itself could perhaps explain the difference in style. Even if we look at Romans, which is written to a community with which Paul was not especially involved, we still find a good deal of argument, countering of contrary opinions and the need and desire to have constant recourse to Scripture. We find none of these elements in Ephesians. It seems to me that its very uniqueness justifies us in not being surprised at the uniqueness of its style, and in not being persuaded that this difference demands another author.

We noted above that Barth and Blanke in 1994 conclude that Paul is the author of Ephesians. P.T.O’Brien reaches the same conclusion in his 1999 commentary on Ephesians. It is important to add that a firm decision on authorship is not essential for an appreciation of this inspired and magnificent letter, which does offer us an excellent overview of a number of Paul’s central insights. I suggest that, finding himself confined in Caesarea, hearing that the problems he tried to counter in Colossae were spreading in Asia, and before he found himself in a new situation (Rome), with a new mission field opening up (Spain), Paul decided to write a general letter to the Gentile churches in the east, picking up some of the ideas he had earlier covered in Colossians, but extending the content to give a summary of key aspects of his gospel.

The Structure

The Structure of Ephesians

Opening address	1:1-2
Introduction	
1. Hymn praising God for his providential design for the world to gather everyone into the church, the body of Christ	1:3-14
2. A prayer of gratitude and a petition that the Gentiles will grasp the significance of God's design	1:15-23
Part One : God's plan revealed	
1. The Gentiles are called to be united to the Jews living Christ's life in the church	2:1-22
2. Paul's commission is to make God's plan known	3:1-13
3. Paul prays for them and praises God	3:14-21
Part Two : Living the mystery	
1. The importance of unity in the Church. The gifts which the Spirit has given to establish and support this unity, and the kind of life it requires of the Christian	4:1-16
2. They must change from their former behaviour, and live Christ's life	4:17-24
3. The demands of living in harmony	4:25 - 5:2
4. Sexual morality	5:3-14
5. Behaviour in the Assembly	5:15-20
6. Relationships in the Christian family	5:21 - 6:9
Epilogue : The struggle involved in living a Christian life	6:10-20
Greetings and blessing	6:21-24

The liturgical readings

1:1-10	28th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:3-6,15-18	2nd Sunday after Christmas
1:11-14	28th Friday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:15-23	28th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:17-23	Ascension Thursday Year A
2:1-10	29th Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
2:4-10	4th Sunday of Lent Year B
2:11	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
2:12-22	29th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
2:13-18	16th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
3:1,13	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:2-12	29th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:2-3,5-6	Epiphany
3:8-12,14-19	Sacred Heart Year B
3:14-21	29th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
4:1-6	17th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B and 29th Friday Year II
4:1-13	Ascension Thursday Year B
4:7-16	29th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
4:17,20-24	18th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
4:18-19,25-29	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
4:30 - 5:2	19th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
4:32 - 5:8	30th Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
5:8-14	4th Sunday of Lent Year A
5:15-20	20th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
5:21-32	21st Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
5:21-33	30th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
6:1-9	30th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year II
6:10-20	30th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
6:21-24	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

**¹Paul, an apostle
of Christ Jesus
by the will of
God,**

**To the saints
who are [in
Ephesus and
are] faithful in
Christ Jesus:**

**²Grace to you
and peace from
God our Father
and the Lord
Jesus Christ.**

There is nothing special about Paul's greeting, as a comparison with his other letters will show. It is identical with the opening words of Colossians, except that here he goes back to his usual custom of including 'and the Lord Jesus Christ' when he wishes his readers 'grace and peace'. The only remarkable feature is that 'Ephesus' is not found in a number of important ancient manuscripts, and hence has been placed in brackets in the translation. This matter was discussed in the introduction where it was suggested that this is a circular letter intended for all the churches in the east. The fact that 'Ephesus' appears at all is perhaps because it was the Ephesian copy that was used when compiling Paul's letters. The circular and general nature of the letter may also explain why Paul does not include others in the address.

Using, as always, his Roman family name (see page 11), Paul refers to himself as an 'apostle'. He is writing this letter in an official capacity by virtue of the commission given him by the risen Christ to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. He is 'an apostle of Christ Jesus', not only because it is from Christ that he receives his commission, but also because he belongs to Christ and shares in Christ's life. It is out of this communion that he is writing, and so he wishes his readers, as they hear this letter proclaimed, to hear Christ speaking through him. Paul is an apostle, not by his own choice, but by the will of God. He is also assuring his readers that he is writing to them out of his prayer and because he has discerned that it is God's will that he do so. We are right to speak of this letter as inspired and to refer to it as 'the word of God'.

He describes those to whom he is writing as 'saints', as 'faithful', and as being 'in Christ Jesus'. They are 'saints' because they have been set aside and sanctified by God's Holy Spirit. They are 'faithful' because they welcomed in faith the good news that was proclaimed to them. They are 'in Christ Jesus' because they are sharing in the communion of love that is the life of the risen Christ. Christ is living in them, and they are living in Christ in a shared communion with God. Paul's prayer for them is that they will remain open to the gift of life that God our Father continues graciously to pour out upon them through Jesus, and that they will know the peace that comes when their whole being and everything they do is full of the harmony that comes from sharing in God's life.

We have meditated at more length on 'Christ', 'grace', 'peace', 'Father' and 'Lord' when commenting on Galatians 1:1-3; on 'faith' when commenting on Galatians 2:16; and on 'apostle' when commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:28.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 blessing us in Christ
 with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,
⁴for he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world
 to be holy and blameless before him in love,
⁵destining us for adoption as sons for himself through Jesus Christ,
 according to the good pleasure of his will,
⁶to the praise of his glorious grace
 that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved
⁷in whom we have redemption through his blood,
 the forgiveness of our trespasses,
 according to the riches of his grace
⁸that he lavished on us
 with all wisdom and insight
⁹making known to us the mystery of his will,
 according to his good pleasure that he determined in himself,
¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ,
 things in heaven and things on earth, in him
¹¹in whom *we* have also obtained an inheritance,
 having been destined according to the purpose of him
 who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,
¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ,
 might live for the praise of his glory
¹³in whom *you* also, hearing the word of truth,
 the gospel of your salvation, and believing in him,
 were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit,
¹⁴who is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption
 as those who are God's possession, to the praise of his glory.

In accordance with the style of formal letter-writing of his day, Paul normally follows the address by an expression of thanks. Here, however, before the customary thanks (1:15-16), he breaks into prayer in a sustained hymn of praise. In earlier letters we find examples where the subject matter causes Paul to pause briefly and praise God (see 2Corinthians 11:31; Romans 1:25; 9:5). In his second letter to the Corinthians he even begins his letter in this way (2Corinthians 1:3-4). In Colossians he quotes and uses a hymn which expresses key ideas which he intends to develop in the letter. However, nowhere else is the whole letter set in a prayer of praise. In Greek, this hymn-like prayer is one single sentence, one single movement of adoration. Though no other sentence in the letter is as long as this, long convoluted sentences occur throughout the letter. This is the main argument in favour of this letter being composed by someone other than Paul. On the other hand it may be that here he is free from the thrust of argument and controversy, and that it is this which allows him to write in a style more suited to meditation and to prayer. Let us join him as he is caught up in wonder at what it means to be 'in Christ'.

**³Blessed be the
God and Father
of our Lord Jesus
Christ,**

**blessing us [NRSV
'who has blessed
us'] in Christ with
every spiritual
blessing in the
heavenly places**

It is clear from the opening word, 'Blessed', that we are being invited to join Paul in a prayer of praise. As in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, our praise is directed to 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2Corinthians 1:3). This is the God whom Jesus revealed to us in his words, but especially in his way of loving. This is the God to whom Jesus prayed, the God who is the source of Jesus' life (the Father): the life of communion in love which he now enjoys in glory.

Using an aorist participle, which carries no temporal nuance and is perhaps best translated by a present form in English, Paul states the reason for our hymn of praise: God is the one bestowing blessings upon us. Though the rest of the hymn will highlight certain key blessings, from this opening verse we are invited to praise God for 'every' blessing: for all the ways in which God has shown and is showing his love for us.

Using three expressions which will be clarified in the following verses, the hymn begins to focus our contemplation. First, the blessings to which the hymn draws our attention are those given us 'in Christ'. This is one of Paul's favourite expressions. We reflected on aspects of its rich significance when commenting on Romans 8:1-2. Our hymn will highlight one important dimension when it says: '*In him* we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us' (1:7).

Secondly, the blessings for which we are praising God are described as 'spiritual'. This prepares us for the climax of the hymn which reads: 'You were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory' (1:13-14).

Thirdly, the blessings are described as being 'in the heavenly places'. The Greek *epouranioi* refers not to the physical heavens (the sky), but to the realm of God and the spirits, imagined as being beyond the sky. The expression is picked up later when Paul speaks of God who 'raised us up with him and seated us with him *in the heavenly places* in Christ Jesus' (2:6). The blessings come from God. They also draw us into communion with his Son.

Here our attention is drawn to the first blessing for which we are invited to praise God. Our gaze is directed beyond space and time to contemplate the wonder of God's eternal design, centred on Christ. It is important to keep reminding ourselves that in God there is no time. The expression 'before the foundation of the world' should be understood as expressing ontological priority, not temporal. Whatever may or may not happen in the realm of history, God has a design for us which transcends everything. Central to this design is that we live our lives 'in Christ' – an expression already highlighted in the previous verse.

We are invited to reflect upon and praise God for four dimensions of this eternal design for us to be in Christ. In his letter to the Colossians Paul speaks of Jesus reconciling us to God. He explains the goal of this reconciliation in the same words as he uses here: 'so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him' (Colossians 1:22).

We are called, firstly, to be 'holy' (see 1 Corinthians 1:2). We are called to live the life of the One before whom the angels bow down in worship: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory' (Isaiah 6:3). We are to be separated from all that is not of God and belong wholly to him.

This holiness is to be manifested in the purity of our lives, for we are called, secondly, to be 'blameless'. Who we are is to be expressed in the way we live. This echoes Paul's words to the Romans: 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Romans 12:1).

Thirdly, we are called to live our lives in God's presence. The words 'before him' suggest that there is also present the image of a spotless gift that is offered in sacrifice to God. We have been consecrated to God and everything we are and do is to be an offering to please him.

Fourthly, we are told what it means to be holy, what it means to be pure, what it means to live in God's presence and to consecrate our lives to God. In a word, it is to live 'in love'. As Paul said to the Corinthians; 'Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Corinthians 16:14). This is the love of Christ that is 'poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit' (Romans 5:5), the love that is the first fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

4for [NRSV 'just as'] he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love

**⁵destining us
(NRSV 'He des-
tined us']
for adoption as
sons for him-
self [NRSV 'for
adoption as his
children]
through Jesus
Christ,
according to the
good pleasure of
his will,
⁶to the praise
of his glorious
grace
that he freely
bestowed on us
in the Beloved**

Just as verse four develops the thought of verse three by explaining how God 'blessed us in Christ'(1:3) by 'choosing us in Christ'(1:4), so verses five and six further specify verse four by describing the purpose of God's choice. It is that we share in the life of his Beloved Son. It is because God has adopted us in this way that we are able to be 'holy and blameless before him in love'(1:4). The word 'destined'(or 'predestined', Greek: *proorizō*) is to be understood in the same way as 'before the foundation of the world' in the previous verse. We are invited again to contemplate God's eternal design that transcends all our human purposes and decisions. A special emphasis should be placed on the expression 'for himself'. The hymn is highlighting God's desire that we relate to him in this intimate way.

As elsewhere in Paul, the word 'adoption-as-sons' includes the aspect of sharing the life of his 'Son', as well as his inheritance (see Galatians 4:5; Romans 8:17). As in both the previous verses, stress is again placed on the fact that this blessing is through Jesus.

The goal of our adoption is that we will be able to praise the radiant beauty ('glory') of God for all that God has graciously bestowed upon us. This is not because God is in need of our praise, as though God's gifts were given for his own self-interest. God is love and God's gifts are an outpouring of love. It is *we* who find our fulfilment and our greatest happiness in praising God. As Irenaeus says: 'The glory of God is a person who is fully alive; and fullness of life is found in the vision of God'(Against the Heresies IV.20.7).

In referring to Jesus as 'the Beloved', Paul uses the perfect passive participle *agapēmenos*, thus stressing the continuous love which God is always showering on his Son. At the Baptism (Luke 3:22), at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5), and in the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12:6), Jesus is called 'the Beloved'(agapētos). In Colossians (1:13), he is called the Son of God's love (agapē). The description of Jesus here in this hymn, while obviously related to these others, is unique. While rejoicing in the wonder of God's design that we are invited to share this love, we recognise that this is a special favour, a gracious gift of a Father who adopts us as his own and invites us to relate to him as his 'sons'. His Beloved Son is the one through whom God's gift comes to us, and the gift consists in sharing his communion of love with his Father. This is, indeed, a 'spiritual blessing'(1:3), because it is through the gift of his Spirit that we are able us to call Jesus' Father our Father (Galatians 4:4-5; Romans 8:14-15).

The hymn continues to recount God's blessings, moving now from a consideration of God's eternal design to the way in which this design has been carried out in history. The focus is on the cross.

The word 'redemption' (Greek: *apolutrōsis*) refers to the payment of a ransom for the freedom of a slave. It came to be used for God's action in the liberating of those who were in slavery in Egypt (see Exodus 6:6). In this case there is no suggestion of the previous slave-owners (the Egyptians) being paid a ransom. When, as here, it refers to our being redeemed by Christ from slavery to sin, there are obvious links with the theme of the Exodus. Some elements of the idea of paying a ransom are also present, in the sense that Jesus gave his life (his 'blood') for us. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 'You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human master' (1 Corinthians 7:23). However, there is no suggestion that a payment is being made *to* anyone. We recall:

They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood.

– Romans 3:24-25

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

– Colossians 1:13-14

Paul will return to the subject of the cross later: 'You have been brought near by the blood of Christ ... through the cross' (2:13,16). Here again we find an echo of what he wrote to the Colossians:

Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through the blood of his cross.

– Colossians 1:20

For the fourth time the word 'grace' is used. As we contemplate the blessings which God lavishes upon us, we are being constantly reminded of the fact that this is not something that we can earn. It is all an outpouring of God's abundant love (compare Romans 5:15,20).

The NRSV translation begins a new sentence with the words 'With all wisdom and insight' and in so doing presents them as qualities that describe God's action as described in verse nine. This is possible. However, it is also possible that they belong with verse eight and that they refer to the wisdom and intelligence that God gives us as part of the abundant outpouring of his grace. This echoes Paul's prayer that the Colossians would be 'filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding' (Colossians 1:9).

⁷in whom [NRSV
'In him']

we have re-
demption

through his
blood,

the forgiveness
of our trespass-
es,

according to
the riches of his
grace

⁸that he lavished
on us with all
wisdom and
insight

**making known
to us [NRSV
'He has made
known to us']**

**the mystery of
his will,**

**according to his
good pleasure
that he deter-
mined in him-
self [NRSV 'set
forth in Christ']**

**¹⁰as a plan for
the fullness of
time,**

**to gather up all
things in Christ
[NRSV 'in him'],**

**things in heaven
and things on
earth in him**

We continue to sing of the blessings of God which engage our wonder and call forth our praise. Not only have we been liberated from the slavery of sin (1:7-8), but God, in his gracious and abundant love, has made his eternal plan known to us.

As in the letter to the Colossians, so here, this plan is referred to as a 'mystery'. We reflected on the significance of this expression when commenting upon Colossians 1:26-27, where Paul defined the mystery as 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. We will have to await the body of the letter for a full exposition of what God's plan is, why it is called a mystery, and how it has been made known to us, but the central truths are already expressed here in summary form.

It is a 'mystery' because it is something that God 'determined in himself', and, as will become clear later, it is something that God has kept to himself till now. It is only in Christ that it has been revealed. It is a definitive plan to be realised 'in the fullness of time'. It involves 'all things, things in heaven and things on earth' (compare Colossians 1:16) – no one and nothing is excluded. God's eternal design which has been made known 'to us' is 'to gather up (*anakephalaioō*) all things in Christ'. We are invited to contemplate God embracing the whole of the created universe in embracing his Son.

When Paul summarised his gospel as being about 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:27), he was giving expression to the central insight of his own conversion experience and to a conviction that motivated his missionary apostolate (see the reflection on that verse). The same conviction is expressed here in these words which form the climax of the first series of blessings. We are invited to join Paul in adoration as we recall what he has done and is doing for us 'in Christ'.

After stating that God has made known his will to 'gather up all things in Christ', the hymn extends our vision beyond humanity to the whole of the created universe ('things in heaven and things on earth') and then, in wonder and praise, repeats the words 'in *him*'. Paul cannot contain his excitement, both at the all-encompassing nature of God's saving purpose, and of the fact that it is 'in Christ' that 'all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). We recall his words to the Colossians:

Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

– Colossians 1:20

Up to this point, the Gentile readers of Ephesians would have known that they were included whenever the text read ‘we’. It embraced all who are ‘in Christ’. Now comes a change, subtle at first, but reinforced by the ‘you also’ in verse thirteen, which refers to Gentile Christians. The focus moves to Jewish Christians and to privileges which were traditionally claimed by Jews. It will become clear that the aim is not to suggest that Jewish Christians are a more privileged group in the church. Quite the contrary. Their privileges are highlighted only in order to reinforce all the more strongly that now, in Christ, these privileges are shared equally by Gentiles.

Jewish Christians ‘have obtained an inheritance’ (*klēroō*), the inheritance promised them long ago as Jews and now experienced in Christ. Paul has spoken of this in other letters in reference to all Christians: ‘if you a son, you are also an heir’ (Galatians 4:7); ‘if sons, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ’ (Romans 8:17):

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring,
heirs according to the promise.

– Galatians 3:29

Give thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the
inheritance of the saints in the light.

– Colossians 1:12

The text of the hymn is, however, open to another interpretation. It could also be translated ‘have been chosen as a special possession’ (with ‘of God’ understood). The idea is traditional:

They are the people of your very own possession (*klēros*).

– Deuteronomy 9:29

The Lord has anointed you [David] ruler over his heritage
(*klēronomia*).

– 1Samuel 10:1

Both ideas are picked up in the concluding verse of the hymn (1:14), which speaks of the Holy Spirit as being the pledge of ‘our inheritance’ and of us being ‘God’s own people’. Once again (see 1:5) we hear of what God has ‘destined’, and of God’s will. It is referring to God’s eternal plan, which transcends all human decisions that are made in time. The Jews were the first to put their hope in the promised Messiah, and the Jewish Christians were the first to recognise Jesus as the one in whom God has fulfilled his promises, the ‘first to set our hope on Christ’. The refrain ‘for the praise of his glory’ is repeated (see 1:6), and it will be repeated again at the conclusion of the hymn.

**¹¹in whom we
have also ob-
tained an inher-
itance,**

**[or ‘have been
chosen as a spe-
cial possession’]**

**having been
destined accord-
ing to the pur-
pose of him who
accomplishes all
things according
to his counsel
and will,**

**¹²so that we,
who were the
first to set our
hope on Christ,
might live for
the praise of his
glory**

¹³**in whom [NRSV
'In him'] you also,
hearing [NRSV
'when you had
heard'] the word of
truth, the gospel of
your salvation, and
believing [NRSV
'had believed'] in
him,**

**were marked with
the seal of the
promised Holy
Spirit;**

¹⁴**this [or 'who'] is
the pledge of our
inheritance to-
ward redemption
as those who are
God's possession
[NRSV 'God's own
people']**

**to the praise of his
glory.**

With these magnificent words, our hymn reaches its conclusion. *The* inheritance which encompasses all God's promises is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that binds the risen Christ to God in a perfect communion of love. This is the gift, poured out upon all who are in Christ, Jew and Gentile alike. The Gentile Christians to whom Paul is writing have heard the gospel, 'the word of truth' (compare Galatians 2:5,14; Colossians 1:5). They have heard who God really is and how God has chosen to reveal himself and his will in Christ. They have heard 'the gospel of your salvation': the good news that they are called to be saved from death, from judgment, and from all that would separate them, now and eternally, from God.

The term 'salvation' (Greek: *sōtēria*) had a special significance for the peoples of Asia. The temple to Artemis (the Roman Diana) in Ephesus was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Its central shrine was an ancient tree-sanctuary, where fugitives from the law were able to seek and find asylum (*sōtēria*). The Gentile Christians have found true salvation, true asylum, in sharing the Spirit of Jesus.

They have not only heard, they have 'believed in him'. They have listened to the gospel, they have accepted it into their lives, and they are allowing the Spirit of the risen Christ to transform them. Slaves were marked with a seal that identified their master. The Spirit identifies them as belonging to Christ, their lord.

In verse fourteen we return to the first person plural. The Spirit is 'our' inheritance, Jew and Gentile together, and the guarantee of final salvation. Alluding to baptism, Paul wrote:

It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment.

– 2Corinthians 1:21-22

Our present experience of the Spirit is a pledge. We have been liberated from all that might enslave us and prevent us from living to the full the divine life. For complete redemption, the fullness of salvation and a perfect sharing in the love-communion of God's Son we must await the resurrection. We are reminded of Paul's words to the Romans where he speaks of 'the first fruits of the Spirit of us who groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23).

It is through the gift of the Spirit that we enjoy communion with God and become God's special possession. The promise made through the prophet Malachi is fulfilled in us: 'They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession'(Malachi 3:17). God can say of us: these are those 'whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise'(Isaiah 43:21).

The hymn concludes with the refrain 'to the praise of his glory'(see 1:6 and 1:12). The unity of all mankind, Jew and Gentile together, and the shared experience of the Spirit, is all in order to reveal the radiant beauty of God's love, so that the whole of creation which is yearning for the liberation which this will bring about (see Romans 8:22) will unite in one cosmic hymn of praise.

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints,

and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,

Having completed the prayer of praise, either composed by himself in the style of a hymn, or borrowed and included here because it expresses so beautifully many of the things he wants to say, Paul gives thanks to God for the faith and love that is evident in the communities to whom he is writing. We reflected on faith in commenting on Galatians 2:16 and on love when commenting on Galatians 5:6. He assures them of his continual prayer for them. We are reminded of similar statements in other letters:

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.

– 2Thessalonians 1:3

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.

– Colossians 1:3-4

His prayer is addressed to ‘the God of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (see 1:3). This is the God to whom Jesus himself prayed, and who has shared with him his glory by drawing him into the communion of love in which the risen life consists. In calling God ‘the Father of glory’, Paul picks up the refrain of the hymn: ‘for the praise of his glory’ (1:6,12,14). God who has filled his Son with the glory of his love pours out this same grace upon all who belong to him.

Paul’s prayer is that we come to know God. For this we will need a special wisdom that, as the word ‘revelation’ indicates, can come only from God’s Spirit. This wisdom is part of ‘the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us’ (1:8). We are reminded of the prayer Paul prayed for the Colossians:

We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding ... as you grow in the knowledge of God.

– Colossians 1:9-10

As God's Spirit draws us into that communion of divine love in which alone we can come to know God, we will also come to see, with a knowledge that penetrates to our hearts, that God wills to share his glory also with us, and that God's power to achieve his purpose has no limits. Again we recall his words to the Colossians in which he gave thanks 'to the Father who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light' (Colossians 1:12). We recall also his words to the Corinthians in which he speaks of God:

who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

– 2Corinthians 4:6

In a special way Paul wants us to know from experience the call of God 'who calls you into his own kingdom and glory' (1Thessalonians 2:12). It is this call, coming through the risen Christ, and proclaimed in the gospel, that assures us of God's love and invites us to place our hope in God. We reflected on the significance of hope when commenting on Galatians 5:5. As we saw in the hymn of praise, the experience of the Holy Spirit is 'the pledge of our inheritance' (1:14). While we trust in the fullness of life that awaits us, we know that God is already working powerfully in our lives. Paul will explain in the following verses that it is by meditating on Christ and his relationship with the church that we will come to grasp the wonder of what God wants for us now and of the inheritance that will be ours.

Paul develops both these themes – of the glory awaiting us, and of the new life that is being engendered in us now – in his letter to the Romans (see especially Romans 6:1-11 and 8:1-11).

¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,

¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,

²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

²²And he has put all things under his feet

and has given him who is head of all things to the church [NRSV 'has made him the head over all things for the church']

²³which is his body, the fullness of him who is in everything and fills everything [NRSV 'who fills all in all']

Paul speaks first of 'the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead'(Colossians 2:12). He speaks also of the power exercised by the risen Christ, who has been 'declared to be Son of God with power ... by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord'(Romans 1:4). God's design in creating human beings, and God's design for the Messiah are fulfilled in him who is 'seated at the right hand of God'(Colossians 3:1). 'The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool"'(Psalm 110:1). Whatever beings exercise power, whether they be for God or against God, whether they be in this world or in the sphere of the heavens, whether they are active now ('in this age') or when history has reached its goal ('in the age to come'), God has made the risen Christ Lord of all (compare Colossians 1:16; 2:10,15). 'You have crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet'(Psalm 8:5-6).

Paul concludes his introduction with three statements that are to be read in the light of the opening hymn of praise and that prepare us for the main themes which he is about to develop in the body of the letter. They are themes that he develops also in his letter to the Colossians. The first is that Christ is 'the head of all things' (compare Colossians 1:15-20). The second is that God has given him to the church which is his body (compare Colossians 1:18,24). The third is that Christ, who has received from God the fullness of glory, is now 'in everything', 'filling everything' with the glory that he has received, and that the fullness of life, of love, of grace that belong to the risen Christ is found in the church.

Though verse twenty-three has been translated in different ways, the most satisfactory understanding seems to be that Paul is stating again that in Christ we find the fullness of God. Furthermore, while everything shares in the grace of Christ and reflects something of his fullness, it is to the church that we must look if we wish to see his fullness, for he fills the church with his Spirit (it can be called, therefore, his 'body') and pours out the fullness of grace into her. The church is the body which he fills with his life, which radiates his glory throughout the cosmos, and which draws the whole of humankind and all creation into his fullness as it is built up and grows into him.

Paul's prayer for the communities to whom he is writing is that they may know all this, and knowing it believe in Christ. Being filled with the power of God, they will be enabled to carry out their mission in the world according to God's magnificent design, until the fullness of time.

Paul is now ready to focus on the key points which he wishes to develop in this letter. He begins by reflecting on the amazing way in which God has shown his love by sharing with us the glory that he has given to the risen Christ (see 2:4-10). To prepare his readers, and by way of contrast, he reminds them of what their life was like before they came to believe in Jesus and to experience true 'life'. What they knew before can only be called 'death' (compare Colossians 2:13). He also makes the point that they were not alone in this: everyone was in the same situation.

There is no need to try to find a distinction between 'trespasses' and 'sins', or between the various influences for evil which Paul names in verse two. His sole purpose is to create a general picture which everyone will recognise of the way things were when we were prey to what he calls elsewhere 'the god of this world who has blinded the minds of the unbelievers' (2Corinthians 4:4), and to our own fickle desires and corrupted thinking. Paul will speak later of 'the futility of their minds' (4:17), when they were 'estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds' (Colossians 1:21).

In his letter to the Romans (7:14-24), Paul describes the psychological state of living in this way. Here he simply states that before God, in his love, gave us Christ and a share in his risen life, this is what the human condition was like for us. This is the way it still is 'for those who are disobedient': who fail to hear and follow God's word. 'Those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Romans 8:8), and in following 'our sinful passions', we were 'bearing fruit for death' (Romans 7:5).

When Paul says that this is the way we all were 'by nature' (Greek: *phusis*), he is not using a metaphysical term to describe our being as humans. The term 'nature' was a scientific term for describing how something behaved. Paul is saying, in effect: 'judging from the way we were acting, we were all children of wrath'. We had no way of avoiding the consequences of our actions which led to definitive separation from God, definitive 'death' (we reflected on the significance of 'wrath' in commenting on 1Thessalonians 1:10).

Scholars differ in their interpretation of the 'us' in verse three. Some see it simply as an inclusive term covering all those who are in Christ (including the 'you' to whom Paul is writing). Others hear an echo of the 'we' of 1:11-12 of the hymn, where it refers to 'we Jews'. Either way, Paul is saying that everyone was in the same situation.

**¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins
²in which you once lived,**

following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and thoughts [NRSV 'senses']

and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

**⁴But God,
who is rich
in mercy,
out of the
great love
with which
he loved us**

Referring to all those who are 'in Christ', Paul speaks now of 'the great love with which God loved us'. Because of the condition in which we all existed previously, a condition just described in 2:1-3, he speaks of God's love in terms of 'mercy' (Greek: *eleos*). Paul referred to God's mercy in his letter to the Galatians (6:16), and reflected on the wonder of it in his Letter to the Romans (9:23, 11:31, 15:9). It is a word which has a rich set of meanings in biblical Greek. It is used to translate three different Hebrew words. The first is \square *anan*, which speaks of God's gracious care and all the ways in which God looks after us. In the following two examples, the Greek Bible has *eleos*, and the Hebrew text uses *hanan*:

Gracious is the Lord, and righteous.

– Psalm 116:5

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be *gracious* to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

In some texts the Greek *eleos* translates the Hebrew *ra \square am*, which speaks of the tenderness of God's love:

Our God is *merciful*.

– Psalm 116:5

In you the orphan finds *mercy*.

– Hosea 14:4

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his *mercy*, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

– Isaiah 63:7

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his *mercies* never come to an end; they are new every morning.

– Lamentations 3:22-23

Finally, there are innumerable texts in which *eleos* translates \square *esed* which places the focus on God's faithfulness to the commitment of love which he has made to us:

I will not take my *steadfast love* from David.

– 2Samuel 7:15

I the Lord your God show *steadfast love* to the thousandth generation.

– Exodus 20:6

With everlasting *love* I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer ... my *steadfast love* shall not depart from you.

– Isaiah 54:8,10

Paul's central affirmation here is evident: he is speaking of the life which we share 'with Christ' (verse five), 'in Christ Jesus' (verses six and seven). However, we should note that the words 'with him' which occur twice in verse six have been supplied by the translator and are not found in the Greek. In both cases, Paul has created a compound verb: 'raised up together' (*sunegairō*; see also Colossians 2:12, 3:1), and 'seated together' (*sugkathizō*). Note also verse five, 'made alive together' (*suzōopoieō*; see also Colossians 2:13).

Undoubtedly, Paul's focus is on our being 'made alive' with Christ, 'raised up' with Christ, and 'seated' with Christ (see 1:20). The question arises: Is Paul also rejoicing in the fact that it is Jews and Gentiles together who are 'with Christ'? In other words, does the Greek prefix *sun* which Paul has added to his verbs have the effect of reinforcing the idea of our being with Christ, or does it express the fact that we are 'with each other' in being with Christ? Are we hearing an echo here of the hymn which praised God for the wonderful, all-embracing communion between Jews and Gentiles that he has brought about through Christ (see 1:11-14)? I suggest we are.

Paul frequently speaks of the Christian's union with Christ in terms of life. To the Romans he writes: 'just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Romans 6:4). The new life is a sharing in the risen life of Christ. In Colossians, he speaks of this experience as one of being 'raised with Christ' (Colossians 3:1), and in a statement very like his statement here, he writes: 'when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him' (Colossians 2:13). Here in Ephesians he goes further along the same lines and says that we are already seated with Christ in heaven, reigning with him in glory. We are already living 'in the heavenly places' (see 1:3), because *he* is there, and he is our life (see Colossians 3:3-4). In this sense Paul can say that we 'have been saved'.

In verse five he expresses in an aside a point that he will develop in verses eight to ten. We are saved, not because of anything we have done, but as an unearned outpouring of grace from our loving God. In verse seven, Paul cannot hold back the words that tumble over each other as he speaks of the abundant and endless love, ('the riches of his grace', 1:7), that God is pouring out upon us 'in Christ Jesus', and will continue to pour out 'in the ages to come'.

**⁵even when
we were dead
through our tres-
passes,
(God) made us
alive together
with Christ
- by grace you
have been saved -
⁶and raised us up
together [NRSV
'with him']
and seated us
together [NRSV
'with him']
in the heavenly
places
in Christ Jesus,
⁷so that in the
ages to come he
might show the
immeasurable
riches of his grace
in kindness to-
ward us
in Christ Jesus.**

**⁸For by grace
you have been
saved through
faith,
and this is not
your own doing;
it is the gift of
God —
⁹not the result
of works, so
that no one may
boast.
¹⁰For we are
what he has
made us,
created in Christ
Jesus for good
works, which
God prepared
beforehand to
be our way of
life.**

Paul reiterates what he said in passing in verse five: 'by grace you have been saved'. In his Corinthian correspondence, he speaks of Christians as those who '*are being saved*' (1Corinthians 1:18; 2Corinthians 2:15). To the Romans he speaks of our confidence, because of what Christ has done, that we '*will be saved through him*' (Romans 5:9): saved from death at the final judgment. Here in Ephesians, Paul says that we '*have been saved*'. He uses the perfect tense, indicating something that has already happened, the effects of which are already being experienced. This is simply a change of terminology resulting from a change of emphasis. The basic message is the same. Final salvation is still to come. We still can fall from grace. Heaven is assured from the point of view of God's grace, but we are still able to reject the call and not be saved at the final judgment. We still have to make this salvation our own, as will become especially clear from the second half of this letter. Paul wants to emphasise here God's magnificent eternal design that is above and beyond time. From the eternal perspective it has all already happened. It is all there waiting to be fully enjoyed, and we are already experiencing the first-fruits of this salvation in the life we are living 'in Christ'.

God is love. The 'gift of God' is offered to us freely and graciously out of love. It is not forced upon us, nor is our receiving of it automatic. Though we cannot earn it by anything which we do, or gain it by our human striving, there is something that we need to do, and that is to welcome God's gracious gift 'through faith'. This is something Paul needed to stress in earlier letters (for a reflection on 'faith', see the commentary on Galatians 2:16). Here he is content to assert the fact, without argument.

In his earlier letters, he was mainly concerned to assert that a life of communion with God was not something we could secure by obeying the Jewish law (see Galatians 2:16). This is not his concern here, and though this is still true and is included in Paul's assertion, he is speaking more broadly. Nothing we do can earn this life. It is a 'gift of God'. All praise is to go to God. Not that what we do is of no consequence. As he said to the Galatians: 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). 'We are what he has made us'; literally, 'we are *his* creation' (Greek: *poiēma*, 'poem', 'work of art'). The 'his' is emphatic in Greek. God has given us this new life 'in Christ Jesus' so that what we do will be good. We are not to forget that our good deeds are the fruit of grace. As Paul will say later, it is 'his power at work within us' (3:20) that enables us to do 'what he has prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (see 1:4)..

The opening prayer of praise touched on the distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews, only to rejoice in the fact that we have all received the promised Holy Spirit (1:11-14). Similarly, in the previous section, Paul is delighting in the fact that God, in his abundant love, has united Jews and Gentiles by uniting both groups to Christ (2:4-6). In this present passage the two groups are explicitly named. In the previous section, Paul spoke first of the way things used to be for everyone (2:1-3), only in order to describe what all now enjoy in Christ (2:4-10). He follows the same pattern here, speaking first of the way things used to be for the Gentiles (2:11-12), only in order to state what things are like for them now ‘in Christ Jesus’ (2:13).

The Gentiles are described in the unflattering way in which they were customarily described by Jews: by the fact that they retained the foreskin, which the Jews, by contrast, removed by circumcision. At the same time, there is no flattery in describing circumcision as ‘made by human hands’ – an expression customarily applied by Jews to pagan idols. Paul describes the Gentiles from a Jewish perspective for reasons that become clear in verse twelve. He wants to point out all the privileges which the Jews had and the Gentiles lacked.

As Gentiles, they used to be ‘without Christ’; that is to say, they had no Messiah. Not belonging to the Jewish culture, they did not share in the Jewish way of life with its rights, customs, and privileges. Paul makes special mention of what God had promised Israel and of the various covenants in which the divine commitment was expressed. Finally, they had nothing to hope for (compare 1 Thessalonians 4:13), as they were living ‘without God’ (Greek: *atheos*).

That is how things once were. ‘But now in Christ Jesus’ things are different. Verse thirteen performs the same function as verse four in the previous section. From being ‘far off’ (from God), they have been ‘brought near’ (to God), ‘by the blood of Christ’. This last phrase echoes the words heard earlier in the hymn (see 1:7), and prepares us for the explanation which comes in the following verses.

¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’ — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands —

¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise,

having no hope and without God in the world.

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

**¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances,
that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace**

In Christ, Jews and Gentiles enjoy together the same divine communion. We live the same life, the life of Christ, who is, therefore, our peace (for a reflection on ‘peace’, see the commentary on Galatians 1:3). Christ brought us together ‘in his flesh’. By making his death a gift of love for all, he welcomes all, whatever our culture, to enjoy his love-communion with God. Formerly we were divided, each group hostile to the other. When Paul focuses on the law as the source of this hostility, he is not disparaging the cultural or religious value of Judaism. He is saying that the law was, in fact, a ‘dividing wall’ between Gentiles and Jews, and that it is not the defining factor in being in communion with God. It has been ‘abolished’ because it has reached its goal and has been transcended by Jesus, who picked up all that was of value in the law and set aside all in it that limited our access to divine communion. In the new community of love which shares the life of the risen Christ: ‘there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised ... but Christ is all and in all’ (Colossians 3:11).

Frequently throughout this commentary we have had occasion to reflect on Paul’s insistence on how essential it is that Christians live in a communion that is characterised by love. It has to be so since there is only ‘one God’ and ‘one Lord’ (see 1 Corinthians 8:6). We find this same insistence in these and following verses in which he speaks of ‘one new humanity’, ‘one body’, ‘one Spirit’. This ‘one new humanity’ is more than a new social entity formed from previously separate groups. It is a new creation, born of Christ’s love and existing only ‘in himself’:

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything;
but a new creation is everything!

– Galatians 6:15

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything
old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

– 2Corinthians 5:17

In uniting Jews and Gentiles in this one humanity, Christ made ‘peace’.

Speaking of the sinful human condition in which we are alienated from God, Paul wrote to the Romans:

While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.

– Romans 5:10

Reconciliation encompasses the whole of creation:

Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death.

– Colossians 1:20-22

Here in Ephesians, Paul focuses precisely on how reconciliation with God ‘through the cross’ has brought about reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles ‘in one body’. The parallel between ‘in one body’ and ‘one new humanity’ indicates that Paul is referring to the ‘body’ that is ‘the church of God’ (1 Corinthians 10:32). However, the focus on the cross, and the repetition of the fact that the reconciliation has happened ‘in himself’, direct our contemplation also to the body of Christ on the cross.

Verse seventeen reminds us that Christ’s whole life was a proclamation of peace, and that this peace is central to the gospel. Paul’s words echo those of Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’

– Isaiah 52:7

Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord.

– Isaiah 57:19

It is because we are ‘in one Spirit’ that we are ‘one humanity’ and ‘in one body’. Paul is speaking of the ‘one Spirit’ that is the life of the body created by Christ. This Spirit is the love that is the bond of communion between Christ and the Father. It is this Spirit poured out upon the whole of humanity from the heart of Jesus on the cross that binds all of us to the same Father in the same communion of love. It is this Spirit that makes us the body of Christ: ‘For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility in himself [NRSV ‘through it].

¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;

¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God

²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone [NRSV ‘cornerstone’].

²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;

²²in whom you also are built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit [NRSV ‘spiritually’].

Paul picks up what he said earlier about the Gentiles being ‘aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise’ (2:12). He went on to say that things were different now thanks to Christ (2:13). Having spelt out what Christ has done (2:14-18), he states here that they are now ‘citizens’ (*sumpolitēs*, ‘co-citizens’; compare 2:5-6) with the saints’. Just as the Jews have inherited the promises by being members of the Christian church (the ‘saints’), so have the Gentiles. He also said earlier that formerly they were living ‘without God in the world’ (2:12). Now they are at home with God, for they are members of God’s household.

Paul moves from speaking of the church as God’s household to speaking of it as a house. It is founded on the proclamation of those whom Christ has sent to preach the gospel (the ‘apostles’), and upon those through whom the Spirit of the risen Christ continues to guide us (the ‘prophets’). In an earlier letter Paul wrote: ‘For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ’ (1 Corinthians 3:11). There is no contradiction here. Perhaps the explanation for the difference is found in the word *akrogōniaios* to which Christ is compared. This is not a technical building term, and has been translated ‘cornerstone’, ‘keystone’, and ‘capstone’. Here ‘capstone’ seems best. Having spoken of Christ as being ‘head over all things’ (1:22), Paul speaks of him here as the stone which is at the highest point of the building, crowning the whole edifice. The church in which Jews and Gentiles are ‘built together’ (*sunoikodomeō*) reaches up into the heavens where Christ its head is the source of its unity, life and organisation. All the members of the Church are living towards being with him for ever in glory, for the church ‘is his body, the fullness of him who fills all things’ (1:23).

The verb ‘joined together’ (*sunarmologeō*) contains the root of the English word ‘harmony’. It is not any kind of growth that is important for the church: it is growth ‘in him’, and therefore growth that is in him who ‘is our peace’; it is growth that is harmonious, that respects the differences between Gentiles and Jews while binding them together in love. This kind of growth can happen only ‘in him’. The repetition ‘in the Lord’ suggests obedience.

A reflection on Ephesians 2

As we look back over chapter two, we are struck with Paul's insistence on the necessity of Jews and Gentiles respecting each other's differences, but living together and growing together in love. This concern shows through in all his letters, but it is particularly evident here as he focuses on reconciliation and harmony. It is striking that he speaks of Christ as 'our peace'(2:14). He calls the Christian community a 'holy temple'. He opened his letter with a hymn of praise, with the refrain 'for the praise of his glory'. Now he has spoken of a growing together in harmony. Though Paul himself does not explicitly use the comparison, we are being faithful to his thought if we think of the church in a musical metaphor.

Like an orchestra, the church is a celebration of difference. In an orchestra each instrument has its own special character. If the music is to have harmony, each group of instruments must not only be true to itself, but must be sensitive to each of the others. So it is to be in the church whose life is 'for the praise of his glory'. The music that is to rise to God from his holy temple is to be the music of love, the love of the heart of Jesus, the love which the risen Christ enjoys in the intimacy of his Father's eternal embrace, the love that God has 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit'(Romans 5:5).

¹This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus
for the sake of you Gentiles —

²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace
that was given me for you,

³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation,
as I wrote above in a few words,

⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive
my understanding of the mystery of Christ

⁵which in former generations
was not made known to humankind, as it has now

been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same
body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel

⁷of which I have become a servant according to the gift of God's
grace that was given me by the working of his power.

⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me
to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,

⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery
hidden for ages in God who created all things;

¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety
might now be made known to the rulers and authorities
in the heavenly places

¹¹in accordance with the eternal purpose
that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence
through faith in him.

¹³I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you;
they are your glory.

* * * * *

Before we begin to examine Paul's words in detail, some aspects of the text as a whole should be noted. The style resembles that of the hymn and of the earlier chapters. Verses two to seven, for example, is one single sentence in Greek. It is the same for verses eight to twelve. Note also the repetitions: three times he speaks of 'the grace given to me' (3:2,7,8). Three times he speaks of the 'mystery' (3:3,4,9), and three times he uses the expression 'made known to' (3:3,5,10).

He explicitly states that his purpose here is to help his readers grasp what he has just been saying (3:3-4). He speaks of it here in terms of 'mystery'. Before addressing the proclamation of this mystery (3:8b-12), he explains its content (3:2-6): 'the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (3:6).

The words ‘fellow heirs’(*sugklēronoma*), ‘of the same body’(*sussōma*), and ‘sharers’(*summetochos*) add to the ‘*sun*’ words which Paul has already used to express the sharing between Jews and Gentiles that is central to God’s will. We have already met ‘made alive together’ (*suzōopoieō*, 2:5); ‘raised up with’(*sunegeirō*, 2:6); ‘made to sit together’(*sugkathizō*, 2:6); ‘citizens together’ (*sumpolitēs*, 2:19); ‘joined together’(*sunarmologeō*, 2:21) and ‘built together’ (*sunoikodomeō*, 2:22).

Again and again he refers back to the opening hymn. The expression already referred to, ‘made known to’(3:3,5,10) occurs also in the hymn (1:9). He speaks again of God’s ‘Spirit’(3:5; 1:13), ‘plan’(3:9; 1:10), and ‘purpose’(3:11; 1:11); of ‘the heavenly places’(3:10; 1:3), of the ‘riches’ of Christ (3:8; see 1:7), of ‘wisdom’(3:10; 1:8), and ‘glory’(3:13; 1:6,12,14); of the ‘gospel’(3:6; 1:13), and of our being ‘heirs’(3:6; 1:11,14). Many of these words occur also in 1:15-23 and in 2:1-22. There are also words which are found in these earlier sections which are not found in the hymn, but which are picked up again by Paul here in 3:1-13. He speaks of God’s ‘gift’(3:2,7; 1:17,22), and of God’s ‘power’(3:7; 1:19,20) and ‘creating’(3:9; 2:10,15). He speaks again of ‘revelation’(3:3,5; 1:17), and of bringing people to ‘see’(3:9; 1:18). He speaks again of the ‘church’(3:10; 1:22) as a ‘body’(3:6; 1:23; 2:16). Note also Paul’s earlier reference to the ‘apostles and prophets’(3:5; 2:20), as well as to our ‘access to God’(3:12; 2:18).

We should also note the close relationship between Paul’s words here (especially 3:1-6) and what he wrote to the Colossians:

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh of Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,

the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations

but has now been **revealed** [‘shown’] to his saints.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

– Colossians 1:23-29

The many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians is one of the reasons for the suggestion that someone other than Paul drew heavily on Colossians to compose Ephesians. The similarities here are especially close. At the same time we should not fail to notice the differences. The passage in Colossians states that the mystery has been ‘*shown* to his saints’; Ephesians adds that it is *revealed* to the apostles and prophets. Also the Ephesian passage gives greater emphasis to the church when speaking of the content of the mystery (see 3:6), and also of its proclamation (see 3:10). If, as we suggest, Paul is writing a general letter to the Gentile churches in the East, we should not be surprised that he would repeat significant ideas that he has already expressed in earlier letters, especially those of a general nature.

¹This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles —

²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,

³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ

⁵which in former generations (NRSV 'In former generations this mystery') was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel

⁷of which (NRSV 'Of this gospel') I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.

Though Paul does not complete the sentence which he begins in verse one, he does complete the idea. He is a prisoner 'for Christ Jesus': he is there because he is carrying out the commission given him by Christ. He is a prisoner 'for the sake of you Gentiles': the commission given him by Christ concerns them, and he is in prison because of the stand which he takes in their regard. What the commission consists in, and what he refuses to compromise on, is precisely what he goes on to explain in the sentence which runs from verse two to verse seven. It concerns something which he calls 'the mystery', a term which we met earlier in the introductory hymn:

He has made known to us *the mystery* of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him.

– Ephesians 1:9-10

Paul directs us back to what he has already said, assuring us that we will find expressed there his 'understanding of the mystery'. At the same time, he further clarifies its essential elements. He insists first on the divine origin of his knowledge: it is something that he has received from God in a 'revelation' (Greek: *apokalupsis*). Secondly, he defines it as 'the mystery of Christ'. The simple genitive construction leaves the connection between the 'mystery' and 'Christ' wide open. For the moment Paul is giving us the key focus: we cannot grasp the mystery except by contemplating Christ. Thirdly, he explains why he speaks of it as a 'mystery': it is something which has been *hidden* till now. We know about it only because God has now chosen to reveal it 'by (or 'in') the Spirit' to his 'apostles' – which includes Paul (see 1:1) – and 'prophets' (see 2:20).

In verse six Paul describes the content of the mystery that God has revealed: it concerns his eternal design that 'in Christ Jesus', as 'members of the same body', Gentiles, as Gentiles, are to share in the inheritance and the promise. This is made known 'through the gospel'. To grasp Paul's reason for speaking here of 'heirs', the 'body', and the 'promise', we need to go back and read what he has already written.

Let us go first to the concluding words of the hymn, where he speaks of the promise and the inheritance. The '*promised* Holy Spirit' whom Jews and Gentiles have received is 'the pledge of our *inheritance* toward redemption as those who are God's possession, to the praise of his glory'(1:13-14). Paul went on to pray that 'with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious *inheritance* among the saints'(1:18). It is obvious that those with whom the Gentiles share are the Jews. It is obvious, further, that both Jews and Gentiles inherit together the same Holy Spirit: the same intimate communion of love that is the life of the risen Christ with God. Paul has already explained how Christ 'through the cross', put to death the 'hostility' that separated Jews and Gentiles, and 'reconciled both groups to God'. He did this by bringing them together into 'one *body*'(2:16), the body which is the Christian community: 'the church, which is his *body*, the fullness of him who fills all in all'(1:22-23).

The mystery revealed to Paul and proclaimed in the gospel – and it is because he does proclaim it that he is now in prison – is that it is God's eternal plan, only now made known 'in Christ', that Jews and Gentiles – in other words, all peoples of the earth – are to be united in the church where together they will share in the life of the risen Christ. Indeed, it is the 'mystery of Christ'.

⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,

⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;

¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places

¹¹in accordance (NRSV 'This was in accordance') with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him [or 'through his faith'].

¹³I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul spoke of himself as 'the least of the apostles' (1 Corinthians 15:9). He goes even further here. His authority as an apostle is, like every other quality we have, sheer unearned 'grace', for he is the 'very least', not just of apostles but of all believers. The 'grace' that he has received is to 'bring the news' (Greek: *euaggelizō* 'proclaim the gospel') 'to the Gentiles'. The focus of the gospel, as it has been throughout the letter, is on Christ. In the hymn we sang of 'the riches of grace that God lavished upon us' (1:8). We find these riches in Christ, and they are described here as 'boundless'. The Greek can mean that we can never penetrate to their depths. It can also mean that without the gospel we could never have known they existed.

Paul has just described the mystery and how it has till now been hidden. In verse nine, he refers to creation, and states that what has been hidden is to be made known to 'everyone'. There is nothing esoteric or sectarian about Christianity. In Christ we see the very purpose of creation. The role of the church in making known God's plan to the world is stated in verse ten. We need to keep in mind all that Paul has said about the church up to this point. As the body of Christ, witnessing by the communion in love to which all are invited, the Christian community demonstrates to the world God's love, God's design in creating, and God's plan for the salvation of humankind. Whatever powers there are that exercise influence over human beings – and Paul does not define them – the gospel proclaims that God's love has prevailed.

God's eternal, and therefore definitive and transcendent, will has been 'carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord'. Through 'faith' (see 2:8) – the faith through which we welcome what God offers us in Christ, and the faith that is itself a sharing in the faith of Christ – we have nothing to fear, and can enter into God's presence with the courage given us by Jesus' Spirit and in complete confidence.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote: 'I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh of Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (Colossians 1:24). Here he prays to God that he will not lose heart. Paul's sufferings are part of his apostolic commission, and radiate in the world the beauty of God's love in Christ. They invite all to believe in what God reveals in Christ and, through believing, to share in Christ's glory.

Paul comes to the conclusion of the first section of his letter. He speaks first of the prayer which he offers for his readers (3:14-19, which is one sentence in Greek) and ends with a hymn of praise (3:20-21). Prayer was made standing, kneeling, or prostrate. In his letter to the Romans, Paul quotes Isaiah: 'To me every knee shall bend, every tongue shall swear' (Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11).

He addresses his prayer to 'the Father', to whom his readers also 'have access' (2:18), since they are 'members of the household of God' (2:19). His prayer is that Christ will dwell in their hearts. This is an experience that Paul himself knows well. As he said to the Galatians: 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). It is only 'through faith' that his readers can share this experience, which is one of being 'rooted and grounded in love'. We find much the same idea in his letter to the Colossians:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord,
continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in
him and established in the faith.

– Colossians 2:6-7

Only God can bring this about, and so Paul speaks first of his prayer that God will continue to pour his powerful Spirit into their inmost being. 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). It is this Spirit alone who can transform our hearts into the heart of Christ as we 'are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2Corinthians 3:18).

Through faith we open our hearts to welcome God's gift of the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that the roots of our being go down to love and draw sustenance from it. It is through the Spirit that the communion of love which binds the risen Christ to his Father becomes the foundation of our life, for 'in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord' (2:21).

¹⁴For this reason I go down on [NRSV 'bow'] my knees before the Father

¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name

¹⁶that (NRSV 'I pray that'), according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit,

¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love

**¹⁸that (NRSV ‘I pray that’) you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth –
¹⁹to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge –
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.**

This is not a separate prayer. In Greek it is a continuation of the sentence that began in verse fourteen. It is not the first time in this letter that Paul has spoken of his prayer that his readers will grow in knowledge (see 1:15-23). The knowledge which he prays for here can come only as a gift from God and so as the fruit of the indwelling of Christ that is brought about through the gift of God’s Spirit (3:16-17). As Christ, dwelling in our hearts, increasingly becomes the source of our love and the foundation of all we do, we will come to an ever deepening knowledge of the mystery which Paul has been expounding: that we are ‘with all the saints’. It is in this communion of saints that we will come to ‘know the love of Christ’. Paul does not say that we will come to know *about* the love of Christ. Rather, he is referring to our knowing Christ’s love – a knowing that is possible only in love and by loving.

In speaking of the all-encompassing love of Christ, Paul uses an image which we find also in Job:

The measure of the Almighty is higher than heaven — what can you do? Deeper than Sheol — what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.

– Job 11:8-9

‘With all the saints’, that is to say, as members of ‘the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’(1:22-23), there is no limit to the ‘riches of grace that God lavishes upon us’(1:8), or to ‘the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe’(1:19). There is no limit to ‘the great love with which God loves us’(2:4), or to ‘the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus’(2:7). Even with all these phrases ringing in our ears, we are still amazed when Paul sums up the content of his prayer by telling us that he prays: ‘that you may be filled with all the fullness of God’. It is another way of praying that our whole life will be filled with Christ, ‘for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’(Colossians 2:9).

The first three chapters of the Ephesians have been a sustained symphony of prayer in which the heart of the apostle penetrates the most profound mysteries of God and reaches out in love to the whole of creation. He prays that the immense love of God may indeed transform everyone by drawing everyone into the body of Christ, the church, where we can all experience Christ’s life and radiate his glory to others: ‘to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen’.

The central revelation proclaimed in the gospel concerns the all-embracing nature of God's love, and God's will that all peoples be bound together in love in the church. We should not be surprised that Paul should begin his exhortations by appealing for unity. The word translated here by 'beg' is the Greek *parakaleō*. As noted in the commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:12, and as is particularly clear here, Paul is conscious of being an instrument of the *call* that is coming from the risen Christ. It is for this reason, too, that he reminds them again that he is 'the prisoner in the Lord'. It is Christ who gave his life for us on the cross who appeals to us to live in love, and Paul, as a prisoner, is walking the way of the cross. In this way he is modelling what he is asking of his readers.

We refer the reader to earlier sections of the commentary for an analysis of the three qualities mentioned in verse two: 'humility' (*tapeinophrosunē*, see Colossians 3:12); 'gentleness' (*praütēs*, see 2Corinthians 10:1), and 'patience' (*makrothumia*, see 1Corinthians 13:4). Paul may be using them simply to express three qualities of the life which we are called to live. However, it is more likely that his focus falls directly on 'bearing with one another in love', and that these three qualities are mentioned as being necessary if we are to have such a love.

'Making every effort' translates *spoudazō*, which is an eminently practical word. Paul is calling on them to have more than good will. They are to do everything that is practically necessary for the maintenance of unity. The unity is not one of external conformity. It is unity of 'spirit': a sharing of faith, hope and love, and the thoughts, attitudes, and sentiments that flow from such a communion. The unity of spirit is, indeed, a unity of 'the Spirit', just as the peace of which Paul is speaking is the presence of Christ in their hearts and in their communities, 'for he is our peace' (2:14). Paul is not asking us to create unity or to make peace. The unity that is the fruit of peace is a gift given by God. He is asking that we do all we can to conserve it. There are obvious parallels here with Paul's call to the Colossians:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

– Colossians 3:12-15

¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,

²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

**⁴There is one
body
and one
Spirit,
just as you
were called to
the one hope
of your call-
ing,**

**⁵one Lord,
one faith,
one baptism**

Paul gives the basic grounds for unity. He begins with the ‘one body’(see the commentary on 1Corinthians 12:12). Paul is speaking of ‘the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’(1:23), the church in which Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled to God ‘in one body through the cross’(2:16), the church in which ‘the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’(3:6).

In Paul’s earlier letters he addresses himself to the local community and speaks of it as a church. However, he is also conscious of the union of Christians. One thinks of his warning to the Corinthians to keep in touch with the other Christian communities (1Corinthians 1:2). One thinks of his constant attempts to keep Jews and Gentiles together, and of his collection for Jerusalem, which was also related to this concern for unity. Paul never thought of the communities as being unrelated. How could they be when Christians are ‘baptised into Christ’(Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3)?

There is ‘one Spirit’(see the commentary on Romans 8:2,7). This is ‘the promised Holy Spirit’ whom both Jews and Gentiles have inherited (1:14), the Spirit through whom both Jews and Gentiles ‘have access to the Father’(2:18), the Spirit who gives to the church its life and its unity (4:3).

All members of the church share ‘the one hope’(see the commentary on Galatians 5:5 and Romans 5:2). Paul spoke of this hope earlier when he prayed: ‘may you know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power’(1:18-19).

There is ‘one Lord’, ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’(1:2; see the commentary on Galatians 1:3). He is ‘the head over all things given to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’(1:22-23). It is his Spirit that we have been given; it is his body that we are. It is he who is ‘our peace’(2:14), and who ‘has reconciled us to God in one body’(2:16). ‘In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord’(2:21).

There is ‘one faith’(see the commentary on Galatians 2:16). Through faith we welcomed God’s offer of love. It is through faith ‘in him’, that we were ‘marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit’(1:13). ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God’(2:8). It is ‘through faith’ that Christ dwells in our hearts (3:17).

There is ‘one baptism’(see the commentary on 1Corinthians 1:13-16; Romans 6:3).

The final and ultimate basis for unity is monotheism: there is only 'one God', the Father (see the commentary on Galatians 1:1). It is to this Father that we all have access 'through Christ ... in one Spirit' (2:18). This one God is 'the Father of all', who 'created all things' (3:9). This one God is 'above all', transcending all created being. This one God is 'through all', 'the Father of glory' (1:17) whose power and beauty radiates through the whole of creation and whose love comes to us through all that he has made. In a special way, God has 'blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' (1:3). This one God is 'in all', immanent in everything and holding everything in existence. This is true in a special way of those who are 'members of the household of God' (2:19), who have been 'built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God' (2:22), who are being 'filled with all the fullness of God' (3:19).

**'one God and
Father of all,
who is
above all
and
through all
and
in all.**

Note the order which Paul follows in these verses. Our immediate contact is with the church, with Christians whose lives inspire and attract us. In this church, we experience the Spirit. The Spirit leads us to faith in Christ and to baptism into his body. It is through Christ that we are led to the Father. In view of the fact that Paul goes on to speak about the various gifts that are experienced in the church, it is interesting to note the same Trinitarian structure in his words to the Corinthians:

There are varieties of gifts,
but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services,
but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

– 1Corinthians 12:4-6

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

⁸Therefore it is said

'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.'

(Psalm 68:18)

⁹(When it says, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

¹¹It is he who gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers.

[NRSV 'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers']

To the Romans Paul wrote:

Think of yourself according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.

– Romans 12:3-6

The special focus of his statement here in Ephesians is on Christ as the one who gives the gifts. He sees this as a fuller meaning hidden in the text of Psalm 68:18. The psalm celebrates the victory of God and has the Davidic king *receiving* the spoils of war from his captives. There was, however, a Jewish interpretation which applied the words to Moses ascending the mountain and returning with the gift which he had received from God – the gift of the law. Paul's interpretation is along the same lines, except that he sees the inspired words as fulfilled in the exalted Christ. He has already spoken of Christ's exaltation: 'when God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority ... And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things' (1:20-22). He has already alluded to Jesus' death in speaking of 'his blood' (2:13), and 'the cross' (2:16). He sees Jesus' descent into the grave and his ascent into heaven as reflected in the psalm. However, his main focus is on the gifts given to us by our risen and exalted Lord, and it is to these that he now turns (4:11-16 forms one sentence in Greek).

A comparison with the lists of ministries given in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Romans 12:6-8 helps to highlight three special features of verse eleven. First, it is the *people* with the ministries who are spoken of here as gifts. Secondly, it is the exalted Jesus who gives them as gifts to us. Thirdly, the list is quite precise in its focus, which is on the gospel, not on church organisational leadership. Note that he does not name the overseers (bishops), presbyters (priests), or deacons. They are not excluded, but are included only insofar as they have the gifts which he mentions: gifts of proclaiming the gospel and helping us to grasp its message. Apostles and prophets have already been mentioned (2:20; 3:5). Evangelists proclaim the gospel and teachers help us to understand it. In this context, 'pastors' should be understood in terms of their ministry of discerning, exhorting and encouraging the members of the church in their faith and understanding of the gospel.

In these magnificent words, Paul proclaims that the exalted Jesus has graced these people in a special way and given them to the church in order to maintain unity and build communion. As is clear, unity does not mean uniformity, and communion does not mean conformity. The church is a living organism, and Christ has given us these graced ministers ‘to equip the saints (all who are ‘in Christ’) for the work of ministry’. He does not attempt to name the various ways in which we carry out the church’s ministry (they no doubt varied then, as now, from community to community). His accent is on ‘building up the body of Christ’.

Verse thirteen speaks of three key aspects of this ‘building up’. The first is ‘knowledge’, which has been a recurring theme of this letter. Not any kind of knowledge but knowledge ‘of the Son of God’: knowledge of Christ precisely in the intimacy of his communion with the Father. This knowledge, as Paul has repeatedly insisted (see 1:17-19; 3:18-19), is not something which we can acquire for ourselves. It is knowledge that comes from God and is based, therefore, on ‘faith’. It is knowledge received only in love. Paul’s focus becomes even clearer when we note his accent on ‘unity’ in our faith-knowledge. Unity, too, has been a recurring theme.

The second aspect of the ‘building up’ is our coming to adulthood (compare Colossians 1:28; the contrast is with remaining children, see verse fourteen). The third aspect picks up another recurring theme: that of ‘fullness’. Verse ten spoke of Christ’s exaltation as being ‘that he might fill all things’. We receive this fullness in and through ‘the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (1:23). We receive this fullness by ‘knowing the love of Christ’ (3:19), and Christ has graced us with people gifted with ministries that equip us for this knowledge.

In verse fourteen, Paul presents the alternative to this growth. He makes no attempt to define the false doctrines in any way. He may be referring to things they learned prior to their conversion (see 3:2-3). He is probably including some of the ideas which he mentioned in his letter to the Colossians. His interest here is not in opposing errors. His point is that whatever their source or content (and there would have been local variations), the antidote is found in the unity of faith that is Christ’s gift to the church. It is this unity, with its wonderful diversity, that we must cherish.

¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ

¹⁴so that we should (NRSV ‘We must’) no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming

¹⁵but speaking [‘confessing/ doing’] the truth in love,

we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

In Greek, verse fifteen is a continuation of the sentence that began in verse eleven. Paul is still describing Christ’s purpose in giving to the church those to whom he has given special gifts to proclaim the gospel and expound the mystery to which he has been referring throughout. Christ has given us these gifts so that, knowing Christ through sharing his communion with the Father, and recognising God’s design that all share in this communion by living together as members of the church, we will ‘confess the truth’ (Greek: *alētheuō*). The truth to which Paul is referring is ‘the word of truth, the gospel’ (1:13), and our confession is to be in word and in deed. Like everything else, it is to be ‘in love’.

Our maturing, as Paul has already said, is to be ‘to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (4:13). Once again Paul refers to him as ‘the head’. He is the source of our life and of our harmonious growth. Everything is in view of our ever deepening communion with him, a communion into which we grow together through our mutual love as members of his body.

In a remarkable way, verse sixteen gathers up many of the themes already covered in this section. He speaks again of ‘the body’ (see 4:12), stressing the fact that he is referring, not to part of the body, but to ‘the whole body’. Everyone is involved. No one is excluded. All have a role to play, and all are called ‘into Christ’.

The metaphor of the body allows Paul to speak of the diversity in the church which is one because of the organic cohesion of the various parts, each of which has its contribution to make, and all of which work together for the good of the whole. Notice the two ‘*sun*’ verbs (compare commentary on 2:6): ‘joined together (harmoniously)’ (*sunarmologeō*, see 2:21), and ‘knit together’ (*sumbibazō*, see Colossians 2:19). It is the exalted Christ who has equipped the church with all the gifts it needs for growth (see 4:15). It is Christ who gives to each one what is needed so that we contribute to the harmony of the whole, as the church, his body, is being built up (see 4:12) ‘in love’. He is ‘the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God’ (Colossians 2:19). Paul may be using ‘body’ in its Stoic sense. If so he is thinking of the growth of the whole created universe. The church’s mission cannot be narrower in its scope.

Paul follows his plea for unity with a solemn declaration that being a member of the Church as a Christian Gentile demands a lifestyle radically different from that of the pagan Gentile world – a world to which they once belonged when they were ‘dead through the trespasses and sins’(2:1,5). He makes this declaration with all his apostolic authority ‘in the Lord’.

His description of the immorality prevalent in the pagan world is typical of Jewish writings of the time. It fits with the longer description found in Romans 1:18-32, even to echoing certain phrases: ‘they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened’(Romans 1:21); ‘the lusts of their hearts’(Romans 1:24). There are even closer connections with Paul’s description in Colossians of those who ‘were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds’(Col 1:21): ‘Put to death whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry) ... These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life’(Col 3:5,7). In Colossians Paul is making a straightforward comparison between the way they used to live and the way they should live now. Though, as we have just noted (see 2:1,5) this idea is present in Ephesians, Paul is describing one way of living as a Gentile (the pagan way) in order to make a contrast in the following verses with another way of living as a Gentile (the Christian way).

Throughout the letter, Paul has been insisting on the importance of knowledge. The opening hymn declared that ‘God has made known to us the mystery of his will’(1:9). Paul’s prayer is that ‘God may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you’(1:17-18); and ‘that you may know the love of Christ’(3:19). Consistent with this is his focus here on the connection between the darkness of their minds, their ignorance and hardness of heart, and the immorality of their lives. Not ‘knowing’ God, not ‘knowing Christ’ (a knowledge experienced only in the intimacy of loving communion), the pagan Gentiles have abandoned the only life that can satisfy them - the life of God - and, in desperation, have given themselves up to unrestrained, wanton, ruthless, dissolute indulgence of all their unresolved, discordant desires – what Paul calls elsewhere ‘works of the flesh’. All of this is only a vain attempt to fill up the emptiness. Everything is taken to excess. There is no direction, no harmony, no beauty, and no peace.

¹⁷Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord:

you must no longer live as the Gentiles live,

in the futility of their minds.

¹⁸They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.

¹⁹They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to uncontrolled self-gratification [NRSV ‘licentiousness’], to the point of indulging in all kinds of impurity and greed.

[NRSV ‘greedy to practice every kind of impurity]

²⁰That is not the way you learned Christ!

²¹for surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus,

²²to put away (NRSV “You were taught to put away”) your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts,

²³and to be renewed by the spiritual transformation of your minds,

[NRSV ‘in the spirit of your minds’]

²⁴and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in the righteousness and respect for the sacred which come from the truth.

[NRSV ‘in true righteousness and holiness’]

In these verses which, once again, form one single sentence in Greek (as did 4:17-19), Paul states the general principles which demand of his readers a different way of life to that just described. He reminds them of the gospel which they have heard (see 1:13). They have ‘learned Christ’; that is to say, they have been taught to follow Jesus as his disciples. We ‘learn Christ’ by contemplating the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We should note that the Greek *mathētēs* (‘disciple’) comes from the verb *manthanō* (‘learn’). Knowledge of Christ, in the sense already clarified – knowing him through communion in love (see 3:19) – is an essential condition for living a moral life as a disciple, just as knowing Christ is an essential condition for the harmonious growth of the church (see 4:13).

We should note that Paul has already put what he is saying here, and what he is about to say concerning morality, into a quite specific context. Christian morality can be understood only to the extent that we grasp the ‘mystery’ of the Gospel that we have been taught. A Christian moral life can be lived only ‘in Christ’, only as part of the body of Christ in which we live, from which we receive, and to which we contribute. The section beginning with 4:17 was preceded by 4:1-16, and the context provided there is essential for a proper grasp of what Paul is now saying. The primary moral imperative, as Paul presents it, is to work for the building up of the church in love, for it is in this communion only, as part of the ‘one new humanity’ that Christ ‘created in himself’ (2:15), that we can truly learn to be disciples of Jesus.

Paul’s words here remind us of what he wrote to the Romans: ‘be transformed by the renewing of your minds’ (Romans 12:2). Once again, there are close parallels with Colossians:

You must get rid of all such things ... seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

– Colossians 3:8-10

We must continue to contemplate Jesus:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

In keeping with his focus on the importance of unity in the church and of building up the body of Christ, for its own harmony and for its mission in and to the world, Paul directs his teaching first to those vices that undermine community. No community can survive without trust, and trust demands that we ‘speak the truth to our neighbours’. We recall his earlier statement: ‘confessing/doing the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ’(4:15). It is not just a matter of avoiding lies; it is a matter of ensuring that our communication with each other is based on the truth that is ‘in Jesus’(4:21), ‘the word of truth, the gospel’(1:13). Notice Paul’s reason for insisting on our confessing the truth in word and in deed: ‘we are members of one another’.

His second exhortation concerns anger (Greek: *orgē*), which, if uncontrolled, can destroy a community. He quotes Psalm 4:4 which accepts that there is a just anger, but he recognises also that anger generally results, not from concerned love, but from a loss of temper. Anger, even just anger, can pick up other emotions. It is to these that Paul is referring when he tells us not to let the sun go down on our ‘anger’(*parorgismos*). These can lead to exasperation, bitterness and sin. It is important, therefore, to attempt to resolve the cause of anger quickly. The word ‘devil’(*diabolos*) means ‘liar’, and there is an allusion here to the sin of Cain (compare John 8:44).

Stealing also destroys trust. Instead of taking from others, we should work hard to be able to contribute to them in their need. We are to avoid ‘evil talk’(*sapros*). The image evoked is that of rotten fruit. The rottenness is catching. We are to build up the community (a constant theme in this letter), not only by sharing material support, but also by the gracious words that come from our lips. Verse thirty recalls the following:

The Lord became their saviour in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit.

– Isaiah 63:8-10

If we behave in the ways Paul has been describing, we sin against communion, and we, too, have forgotten God’s love. It is this that grieves the Holy Spirit. We must not forget that we have been ‘marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory’(1:13-14).

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.

²⁶Be angry but do not sin (Psalm 4:4); do not let the sun go down on your anger,

²⁷and do not make room for the devil.

²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,

³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Once again, Paul appeals to us to put aside any behaviour that injures community. Instead we are to have three qualities that are characteristic of God. We are to be ‘kind’ (Greek: *chrēstos*, 2:7; one of the fruits of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22), ‘tenderhearted’ (*charizomai*), and ‘forgiving’ (*charizomai*; see 2Corinthians 2:10). Both the negative and the positive exhortations echo those of Colossians:

You must get rid of all such things — anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth ... As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

– Colossians 3:8,12-14

In the New Testament, the word ‘tenderhearted’ occurs only here. However, it does occur in verse seven of the Prayer of Manasseh:

You are the Lord Most High, *tenderhearted*, long-suffering, and very merciful, and you relent at human suffering. O Lord, according to your great goodness you have promised repentance and forgiveness to those who have sinned against you, and in the multitude of your mercies you have appointed repentance for sinners, so that they may be saved.

**¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,
²And live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

In introducing this section on the Christian life, Paul spoke of ‘learning Christ’ (4:20), and of ‘the truth that is in Jesus’ (4:21). He concludes by appealing to us to ‘be imitators of God as beloved children’ - something which we can learn only from ‘the Son of God’ (4:13). God is our Father, the source of all we are. We are made in God’s image, made to share in the intimate communion of love which is the very life of God. To imitate God, therefore, is to ‘live in love’, or, as Paul has already said, to be ‘rooted and grounded in love’ (3:17).

We can do this only if we open our hearts to the love which Christ offers us. If we welcome Christ’s love into our ‘inner being’ he will join our offering to his. Paul echoes his words to the Galatians: ‘Christ lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). Sharing in this life of God’s Son, we are able to grow towards the kind of perfection which belongs to our Father (Matthew 5:48), by being ‘merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36).

Paul has just been speaking of love. He turns to the perversion of our energies of love that happens when our sexual energies are focused on self-gratification, or, worse still, when we use others as objects for lust rather than channel our sexual energy into true love. Granted the central place of love, and granted the power of our sexuality to energise love in a beautiful way or to pervert it, we are not surprised at how frequently Paul comes back to this subject.

When he speaks of ‘the works of the flesh’ in his letter to the Galatians, Paul begins with fornication and impurity and declares the same punishment: ‘those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (Galatians 5:19,21). Here in Ephesians Paul adds *pleonexia*, translated in the NRSV as ‘greed’. It is the distortion of desire whereby we grasp at something just to possess it and then just as impulsively squander it. In the sexual area it covers all kinds of sexual abuse that are motivated by wanton lust and the urge to exercise power over others. In 1Thessalonians Paul warns against fornication, impurity and ‘exploiting’ others (*pleonekteō*). He adds: ‘the Lord is an avenger in all these things’ (1Thessalonians 4:3-8). In his correspondence with the Corinthians, he includes ‘fornicators’ and the ‘greedy’ among those who will not ‘inherit the kingdom of God’ (1Corinthians 6:9-10).

The closest parallel, however, is found in his letter to the Colossians:

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.

– Colossians 3:5-6

Making a god of sexual desire and its gratification indicates a failure to recognise sexuality as an expression of a more profound yearning which can be satisfied only in communion with God. When we lose ourselves in superficial and insensitive self-gratification, we separate ourselves from the reign of God’s love. We forgo our destined heritage. We are already experiencing ‘the wrath of God’ in the terrible effects of our perverted behaviour (see 1Thessalonians 1:10; Romans 1:18). Paul exhorts us to live the kind of life that is ‘proper among saints’, a life characterised by ‘thanksgiving’.

³But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints.

⁴Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving.

⁵Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.

In the Lord you are light

⁷Therefore do not be associated with them.

⁸For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light —

⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly;

¹³but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,

¹⁴for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’

There are a number of elements in this passage that remind us of Paul’s words to the Thessalonians. Note the contrast between light and darkness, the injunction to wake and not sleep, and the call to take up the battle against what is evil:

You, beloved, are not in darkness ... for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake ... and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

– 1Thessalonians 5:4-8

To the Romans, too, Paul speaks of ‘waking from sleep, for ... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light’ (Romans 13:11-12). Whereas the pagans are ‘darkened in their understanding’ (4:18), the Christian Gentiles are to ‘live as children of the light’ – something which they can do only ‘in the Lord’.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul speaks of ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:22). Here he sums up the ‘fruit of light’ as ‘all that is good and right and true’. He is picking up an earlier statement where he spoke of the need to clothe ourselves ‘with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in the righteousness and respect for the sacred which come from the truth’ (4:24). As is the case throughout the letter, ‘truth’ refers to ‘the word of truth, the gospel’ (1:13).

Verse ten echoes his plea to the Romans:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

– Romans 12:1-2

It is not enough that we reject behaviour that is evil. We must take up the task of exposing evil by bringing everything into the light. Bathed in his light, we are to radiate his light to others, for it is the light of Christ that will dispel the darkness which envelops people’s lives:

It is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

– 2Corinthians 4:6

The concluding quotation is possibly from a baptismal hymn.

The resurrection of Christ is seen by Paul as a definitive act of God, issuing in the final stage of history, in which we prepare for the coming of Christ in judgment and the transformation of the whole of creation in communion with him. In this final stage we are engaged in a life and death struggle between light and darkness (see 1Corinthians 7:26). Evil has already been conquered, but it is unleashing all its energy in a last desperate effort to hold its prey (see 6:11-12,16). It is this which makes the days ‘evil’(see Galatians 1:4).

Paul exhorts us to ‘make the most of the time’ (Greek: *exagorazō*). As he has just insisted in the previous section, he wants us to be armed with the light of Christ, and to go into the world (into the marketplace, *agora*), and be his instruments in redeeming those who are slaves of darkness. There is no simple formula for this: it will require wisdom and a constant discernment of God’s will (compare Romans 12:2). Once again, we have a parallel statement in Colossians: ‘Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time’(Colossians 4:5).

In verse eighteen Paul uses the metaphor of strong drink to highlight the powerful influence of the Spirit in our lives. In verse nineteen he reminds us that we are to be ‘filled with the Spirit’ whenever we come together to share as Christians. In verse twenty he speaks of the liturgy in which we gather as a community to ‘give thanks’(*eucharisteō*). We recall his words to the Colossians:

With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

– Colossians 3:16-17

In the Eucharist we celebrate the real presence of Christ in and among us, binding us together as his body, nurturing us, and drawing us into deeper communion with his passion and resurrection as we partake of his body broken for us and his blood poured out for us. The Spirit that fills us there is the Spirit of Christ, through whom we experience adoption as children of the Father (1:5). Paul began his letter with a song of praise. We are to give voice to such a song whenever we assemble as brothers and sisters of Christ.

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,

¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit,

¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,

²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

This is not a new sentence in Greek. ‘Be subject’(Greek: *hupotassō*) is a participle, linked with the previous verses, and indicating another way of being ‘filled with the Spirit’(5:18). If Paul were using the verb in a literal sense, he would be telling his readers to know their place in the social order and behave accordingly. However, since he tells them to be subject ‘to one another’, his injunction is not intended to reinforce social rank. He is writing to Christian communities in which ‘there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all’(Colossians 3:11). He is asking us to respond to the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ and to model ourselves on Jesus, as Paul himself does: ‘Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all’(1Corinthians 9:19). This is what he asked of the Galatians: ‘Through love become slaves to one another’(Galatians 5:13).

That this is what Paul has in mind is reinforced by his reference to Christ, for this is the command given us by Christ, and we are to carry it out in complete submission to his will, for he is our Lord. We are to have a sense of wonder and awe at the presence of Christ in all who are part of his body. This in turn is to lead us to a sharing in the humility of Christ, whereby we look up to others, subjecting our lives to serving them in love: ‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another’(Romans 13:8).

This much is clear. That there is a lot more to this verse becomes apparent when we realise that it introduces a section in which Paul speaks of the Christian values that are to be lived in the home. We are socialised into ‘traditional family values’ from the first moments of our consciousness. These ‘values’ are basic to society. They are often unconscious and are most resistant to change. Yet the gospel must have something to say here. This brings up the perennial tension between ‘inculturation’(the Christian life relating to the realities of the culture) and ‘acculturation’(the Christian life being compromised by the habits, customs and ‘values’ of a society).

Paul himself lived in a society in which, in the public arena, husbands exercised authority over their wives, and in which domestic slavery was as taken for granted as is the relationship of employer and employee today. Though there is no indication that Paul had a blueprint in his mind of a different way of organising the home, we are left in no doubt of the central values that were to rule all relationships. In this context, what Paul is saying in this verse is, indeed, revolutionary, and if followed faithfully it could not but have a dramatic effect on marriage, family and slavery.

Paul's exhortation to wives in verse twenty-two can be found, almost word for word, in Colossians: 'wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord' (Colossians 1:18). It could appear, at first glance, to be simply an application of the general principle which he has stated in the previous verse. Since all Christians are to be 'subject to one another', wives, for example, should look up to and reverence their husbands in everything, and give themselves in love in serving them. It is when we come to examine the reasons which Paul gives for his exhortation (not found in the parallel passage in Colossians), that we become aware that he is addressing a relationship, traditional in the communities to whom he is writing, in which authority is vested in the husband: 'the husband is the head of the wife'. By contrast with the previous verse, the verb 'be subject' (*hupotassō*) is understood in such a way as to include its literal meaning whereby it refers to rank and social order as accepted in the society of his day.

Is Paul, then, simply reinforcing the already given structure of authority? Is his purpose here to insist that wives recognise their lower position in the social order and behave accordingly? Though Paul assumes the traditional structure, he is not insisting on it. His focus is elsewhere, as can be seen by his reference to Christ, and by his insertion of the key word 'as'.

Assuming the authority of the husband, he is exhorting wives, when they live the reality of their position in the home, to do it *in a certain way*; namely, in the way in which they are subject to the Lord. In choosing to speak of Christ as 'Lord', Paul is already making a point. Christ and Christ alone is their Lord. The values that are to permeate their relationship with their husband are not the values of the world, but those of Christ.

The whole letter prepares us to hear Paul say: 'Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour.' It is not at all apparent, however, what he means when he says: 'the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church'. We are pointing in the right direction if, once again, we focus on the word 'as'. Christ is 'head' and he is faithful in love even to giving his life for the church (see 5:2). Since the husband is head, he should express his authority *in the same way*. Similarly, the 'as' is important when Paul tells wives to be subject 'as the church is subject to Christ'. We will have to await further clarification of Paul's meaning, but this much is already clear: while Paul is not suggesting a change in the authority structure of the family, he is introducing a revolutionary principle that must radically alter it.

²²**Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.**

²³**For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour.**

²⁴**Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.**

²⁵**Husbands,
love your wives,
just as Christ
loved the church
and gave him-
self up
for her,**
²⁶**in order to
make her holy
by cleansing her
with the wash-
ing of water by
the word,**
²⁷**so as to present
the church
to himself
in splendour,
without a spot
or wrinkle
or anything of
the kind —
yes, so that she
may be holy and
without blem-
ish.**

As noted in the commentary on the previous verses, Paul is not simply applying the general principle enunciated in verse twenty-one to various groups within the church. If he were he would tell husbands to be subject to their wives as they are to the Lord. He is assuming an order within marriage whereby authority lies with the husband, and he goes straight to the heart of the Christian life by telling husbands: ‘love your wives, *just as* Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’. He prepared us for this when, speaking of husbands in their role as ‘head’, he spoke of Christ the ‘head’ as being our ‘Saviour’ (5:23). His exhortation echoes his words addressed to all Christians: ‘Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us’ (5:1-2). When he goes on to describe how Christ loved the church, he uses imagery from the ritual preparation of a bride for the nuptials. In his love Christ prepares the church to be presented to him as a bride is prepared to be presented to the king:

Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;
forget your people and your father’s house,
and the king will desire your beauty.
Since he is your lord, bow to him ...
The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;
in many-coloured robes she is led to the king;
behind her the virgins, her companions, follow.
With joy and gladness they are led along
as they enter the palace of the king.

– Psalm 45:10-15

Paul highlights the ‘washing of water’ and the ‘word’. The allusion is to baptism, and the word is the gospel itself, with special reference to the words that accompany baptism ‘in the name of the Lord’. We recall the words spoken by Ananias to Paul on the occasion of Paul’s own baptism: ‘be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name’ (Acts 22:16).

God has chosen all of us ‘in Christ ... to be holy and blameless before him in love’ (1:14). We have all been presented to Christ when ‘he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus’ (2:6). What Paul wrote earlier about Christ being our ‘Saviour’ (5:23), and what he says here about the church, applies equally to both bridegroom and bride. In applying it to the bride is Paul simply reflecting the tradition which spoke of Israel as a bride (see Hosea 2:7; Isaiah 54:5), and in which it is the bridegroom who says: ‘You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you’ (Song of Solomon 4:7)?

Two aspects of this text are clear from a first reading. The first is that Paul is calling upon husbands, once again (see 5:22) to ‘love their wives’. The second is that he keeps Christ before our eyes throughout as the one who ‘nourishes and tenderly cares for the church because we are members of his body’. Other aspects of the text are not as easily comprehended.

Paul speaks of the wife as the ‘body’ of the husband. His reason for doing so becomes apparent only towards the end of the passage. We must first recognise that he is drawing upon the narrative of Adam and Eve in the story of Genesis. Adam is alone in the garden of Eden. God declares: ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’ (Genesis 2:18). God goes on to make all the different living creatures and to present them to Adam ‘but there was not found a helper as his partner’ (Genesis 2:20). So God makes Eve, not by a separate act, but by taking already created flesh from Adam and forming it into Eve. When she is presented to Adam, he exclaims with joy: ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ (Genesis 2:23). There follows the remark quoted by Paul in verse thirty-one. Our first conclusion is that Paul speaks of the wife as the ‘body’ (and ‘flesh’) of the husband in order to recall the intimate communion intended by God the creator. There is already an implied critique of the dominion exercised by husbands over their wives, when we recall that this dominion is a result, not of God’s intention as creator, but of sin (see Genesis 3:16).

However, it is in verse thirty-two that the thrust of Paul’s exhortation finally becomes clear. Throughout the letter, Paul has been speaking of ‘the mystery’: namely, God’s design to bring the whole of humanity into one body in a communion of love by uniting everyone to Christ. He is presenting the communion in love between husband and wife ‘in Christ’ as a special witness to this mystery of communion that exists between Christ and his body the church. The traditional Latin version of the Bible (the ‘Vulgate’) translates the Greek *mustērion* here as ‘*sacramentum*’; hence our referring to marriage as a sacrament: an especially graced union that expresses the intimate love which Christ has for his church.

Paul sums up his teaching by using traditional Jewish and Christian language to call on a husband to love his wife ‘as himself’ (see Galatians 5:14; Mark 12:31). His exhortation to a wife takes us back to his opening sentence; ‘Be subject to one another out of *reverence* for Christ’ (5:21).

²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself.

²⁹For no one ever hates his own body [‘flesh’], but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it,

just as Christ does for the church,

³⁰because we are members of his body.

³¹For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’(Genesis 2:24).

³²This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

³³Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Marriage 'in Christ'

Looking back over Paul's exhortation to wives and husbands, we see that his thought is moving in two directions. As is fitting in the context, and in line with the biblical tradition which speaks of God as a bridegroom and the people as a bride, Paul uses the imagery of marriage to describe the loving care which Jesus has towards his body, the church. Christ is the new Adam (see 1Corinthians 15:21-22; 15:45-49; Romans 5:12-21), the first-born from the dead, who, as the new 'Man', is the source of a new humanity (see 4:24). Christ is Adam and the church is Eve, Christ's own body, the chosen object of his love, living in intimate communion of love with him. 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (5:25). He gave himself up to his executioners, making of his death a self-offering to us in love. He gave himself up to God, making of his dying an act of self-offering in obedient trust to his Father. He did this 'so that she may be holy' (5:26). He wanted to draw the community of believers into the realm of the sacred, filling it with the Holy Spirit of God, and setting it aside as his beloved spouse (compare 1Corinthians 6:11; 2Corinthians 11:2-3). He 'cleansed her with the washing of water by the word' (5:26). Just as a bride is bathed prior to her nuptials, so the Church in baptism is cleansed, in order to enter into a new life with Christ, to be 'raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places' (2:6). The church is presented as the glorious spouse of Christ.

Christ 'nourishes and tenderly cares for' (5:29) the church, filling it with his own divine fullness (see 1:22-23). He pours out his gifts upon the church (see 4:11-16). Besides baptism, we think of the Eucharist (see 5:18-20), and the gift of the fullness of the Spirit (see 5:18). Christ is the 'saviour' (5:23) of the church, in all the ways we have just mentioned; he is also the 'head of the church, his body' (5:23). The church owes him obedience, for he is our 'Lord' (5:22). In brief, Paul takes the relationship between Adam and Eve, the archetype of the relationship between husband and wife, and uses it as an image to describe the relationship between Christ and the community that lives in communion with him.

The complementary movement in Paul's thought, and his primary focus in this section, is to reflect on what this intimacy between Christ and the church means for the relationship between wives and husbands, and also to see how this relationship in turn enriches the life of the Christian community. We have seen that the key to Paul's reflections is found by focusing on the central theme of the letter: what Paul continues to call 'the mystery'. Husbands and wives are to relate in such a way as to be a sacrament of God's design to call everyone into the 'one body', the 'body of Christ'.

Wives are to remember that Christ is the one and only Lord, and, in being subject to their husbands, they are to witness to the values that inform the church in its relationship to Christ. The husband's authority is to be one of love, of self-sacrifice, of a life given that his wife might be seen in her full glory. When Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives 'as their own bodies' (5:28), it emerges that he is reminding them that both they and their wives are one body because they belong to the body of Christ. Paul's reflections on the spousal love of Christ for the church challenge a Christian husband in a number of ways. Firstly, he is included in the initial exhortation: 'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ' (5:21). He is, therefore, to be subject to his wife out of reverence for Christ. At the deepest level of Christian identity, subordination is to be mutual.

Secondly, he must exercise his authority as ‘head’ in the way shown by Christ. Thirdly, he must see in his relationship to his wife a sacrament of Christ’s relationship to her. Three times he is told to ‘love’ her (5:25,28,33), with the love with which Christ loves her. Paul sees in the intimate communion of husband and wife an expression of the mystery that is revealed in the gospel. Their love is a sacrament of the kind of intimate love to which all are called, in which differences enrich but do not divide, nor are they exploited for power of one over another. While Paul does not directly criticise the institution of marriage as it existed in his time, his insistence on love and on the example of Christ contain the power to revolutionise every social institution, including marriage.

In some cultures today, it is no longer assumed that the husband has authority over his wife. A man and a woman commit themselves together in love and as equals to a partnership in which they attempt to reach all decisions in mutual respect and love. When there is disagreement it is not at all assumed that the wife must submit to her husband’s will. A way has to be found to live in unity, and compromises are found to be necessary. When consensus cannot be reached, sometimes one submits, sometimes the other. In such a situation it is no longer satisfactory to apply the principle in the way Paul does. We have to go deeper to the fundamental principle of Christian baptism: ‘There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’(Galatians 3:28). It is no longer satisfactory to compare the husband to Christ and the wife to the church. The husband is Christ for the wife, and the wife is Christ for the husband, and both belong to the community that is loved by Christ and in which his Spirit dwells.

Paul’s basic insight still applies: marriage has been transformed by the fact that the union it expresses has reached its fulfilment in Christ. Marriage is now a sacrament of this communion between Christ and the Church, and so all the relationships that exist between a husband and wife are to be transformed, enlightened and enlivened by the presence of Christ binding wife and husband together in love. When a husband loves his wife, Christ loves her. When a wife loves her husband, Christ loves him. When a husband obeys his wife, he is obeying Christ; and when a wife obeys her husband, she is obeying Christ. When they thank each other, correct each other, or forgive each other, they are to do so ‘in Christ’. When they are ‘subject to one another’(5:21) and discern in love the best way to act together in their married life, using all the spiritual means available to make their discernment, they are doing so, not because of an assumption that the husband commands and the wife obeys, but ‘in Christ’, inspired by his love and guided by his Spirit.

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

²'Honour your father and mother' – this is the first commandment with a promise:

³so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth'(Deuteronomy 5:16).

⁴And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Paul moves from the relationship between husband and wife to the relationship between parents and children. As in the previous section, there is a parallel section in Colossians, but, once again, as a comparison of the texts makes apparent, Ephesians is more extensive:

Children, obey your parents in everything,
for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.
Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they
may lose heart.

– Colossians 3:20-21

The key, as in the previous section, is found in the simple, but all-embracing and revolutionary words: 'in the Lord'. The context in which obedience is to be given is that of the whole letter.

In the light of Paul's teaching elsewhere concerning the promises of God and their fulfilment in Christ and so in the Christian community, we should understand his reference to the 'promise' as including all the riches of the Christian life mentioned in the first three chapters.

As in Colossians, because of the traditional authority structure in the home, the exhortation to parents is directed more particularly to fathers. The word translated here 'bring them up' (Greek: *ektrephō*), is the same word that Paul used earlier when speaking of a husband 'nourishing' his body (5:29). It is the father's duty to provide intellectual and moral nourishment for his children, especially such as is 'of the Lord'. Through obedience to Christian parents, a child will learn of the Lord and learn also how to respond in faith to what God has revealed in Christ.

There are no substantial differences between what Paul writes here and what we find in his letter to the Colossians 3:22 - 4:1. We refer the reader to our commentary on that passage, and also to Paul's letter to Philemon where we find a fuller statement of Paul's thoughts on slavery. In Colossians the motivation for obedience is given as 'fearing the Lord'(3:22). Here, Paul speaks of obeying 'with fear and trembling'. However, the addition of 'as you obey Christ', makes the two statements equivalent. The repetition of this idea in the following verse, 'as slaves of Christ', makes Paul's perspective perfectly clear. His emphasis is on the presence of Christ in the home and in the relationships between a master and a slave. It is this presence that determines the way in which commands are given and obeyed.

There is no indication that Paul envisages a change in the institution of slavery, but, as with marriage earlier, the change in mentality that he is presenting could not leave the institution intact. In any case, institutional changes that are not motivated by a change of mind and heart are notably fragile, and the unconverted attitudes are sure to show themselves in some other way. Conversion to Christ involves a conversion of attitude on every level, including the level of social institutions. Because the only institutional change that is sustainable must grow out of personal conversion, Paul continues to focus on personal change and on building up a community of love.

Paul reminds the masters (Greek: *kurios*, 'lords') that both they and their slaves have the same Lord to whom they are answerable, and that masters will not receive privileged treatment. Recall what he has already said about us all being adopted children of God (see 1:5), and therefore brothers and sisters. We might recall here Paul's words to the Corinthians (see the commentary):

Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. If you can gain your freedom, take the opportunity. In any case, whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.

– 1Corinthians 7:21-24

⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; ⁶not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

⁷Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women,

⁸knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

⁹And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

¹¹Put on the whole armour of God,

so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

We cannot live ‘in Christ’ by our own strength. Paul concludes his exhortations by highlighting the strength of the powers of darkness that are determined to get us to turn back to the way of life which we lived before our conversion to Christ. We need to be strong, and we can be if we live ‘in the Lord’ and ‘in the strength of *his* power’. We recall Paul’s prayer that we know ‘what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power’ (1:19), and that the Father ‘may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit’ (3:16).

Paul has already said that to experience his strength we must clothe ourselves in Christ ‘with the new self, created according to the likeness of God’ (4:24). Here, because he wishes to stress the strength of the enemy, he speaks in terms taken from the battle field. Our enemy is wily. We recall Paul’s earlier warning: ‘We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming’ (4:14). We recall also his earlier reminder: ‘once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light’ (5:14).

Paul speaks of the ‘devil’, referred to earlier as ‘the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient’ (2:2). He speaks, too, of the super-terrestrial powers of darkness, whatever they be, who are ranged against us. We will need ‘the whole armour of God’ to be able to ‘withstand on that evil day’. What the psalmist refers to as ‘the day of trouble’ (see Psalm 41:1; 49:5; 94:13), is already with us. As Paul has already said: ‘the days are evil’ (5:16).

We need not fear the spiritual battle in which we are constantly engaged, for we have ‘the whole armour of God’(6:13). Nor is the armour merely defensive, for, as Paul says to the Corinthians: ‘the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds’(2Corinthians 10:4).

We must gird ourselves with the ‘truth’: ‘the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation’(1:13); the ‘truth as it is in Jesus’(4:21; see also the commentary on 4:25). Paul is referring to the first three chapters of the letter.

We must clothe ourselves in righteousness. Paul is thinking in the first place of God’s righteousness. Isaiah speaks of God ‘putting on righteousness as a breastplate’(Isaiah 59:17). In Christ we are given a share in the righteousness of God as we are clothed ‘with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in the righteousness and respect for the sacred which come from the truth’(4:24).

Earlier, when speaking of the necessity to struggle against the influence of darkness, Paul insisted that we not only live as children of light, but that we expose ‘the unfruitful works of darkness’(5:11). Similarly here, we are to be ‘ready to proclaim the gospel of peace’. Paul is borrowing from Isaiah: ‘How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news’(Isaiah 52:7). As Paul wrote earlier: ‘Christ is our peace’(2:14; see 2:14-18).

Our main defence must be our ‘faith’, for it is ‘through faith’ that ‘Christ dwells in our hearts’(3:17), and it is ‘by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God’(2:18). Isaiah speaks of the ‘helmet of salvation’(Isaiah 59:17), an image already used by Paul in his correspondence with the Thessalonians: ‘Let us put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation’(1Thessalonians 5:8).

Paul concludes with the assurance that the Holy Spirit himself is with us. We have nothing to fear from the powers of darkness: ‘with the breath [‘Spirit’] of his lips he shall kill the wicked’(Isaiah 11:4). We might ask how we are to get all this armour. Paul’s answer comes immediately in the following verses.

¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist,

and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation,

and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

**¹⁸Pray in the Spirit
at all times
in every prayer and
supplication.**

**To that end keep
alert and
always persevere
in supplication
for all the saints.**

**¹⁹Pray also for me,
so that when I
speak, a message
may be given to
me to make known
with boldness
the mystery
of the gospel,**

**²⁰for which I am
an ambassador
in chains.**

**Pray that I may
declare it boldly,
as I must speak.**

This is not a new sentence in Greek. It begins with a participle which links what is said here with the previous verses. In fact it is basic to all that Paul has said about our needing to be clothed in ‘the whole armour of God’ (6:13). This is not something which we can do by our own will. It is all grace. Certainly we can be assured that it is a grace which God offers unconditionally. But it is a grace offered in love. If the grace is to be received, our hearts must be open to welcome it, and it is here that prayer plays an essential part. Paul exhorted the Colossians in a similar way: ‘Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving’(Colossians 4:2).

Notice the stress on ‘all’ in verse eighteen. We are to engage in *all* sorts of prayer; praise and thanksgiving have featured strongly in this letter. Here Paul puts the accent on ‘supplication’. We are to pray at *all* times. We are to persevere in prayer in *all* circumstances, and we are to pray for *all* the saints. Luke tells us of a parable of Jesus ‘about their need to pray always and not to lose heart’(Luke 18:1). We recall the words of Jesus telling us to ‘be alert at all times, praying’(Luke 21:36).

Our prayer, like everything else in the Christian life, is not something that we do from our own resources. We are to ‘pray in the Spirit’, for it is in the Spirit that we experience communion with Christ and through him with the Father. It is in prayer that the church achieves its goal of being ‘to the praise of his glory’(1:14). Paul’s words to the Romans are especially pertinent:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

– Romans 8:26-27

As frequently in his letters, Paul asks for prayers for himself that he will be open to receive the grace ‘to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel’. In this way he returns to the main theme of his letter: the wonderful design of the Father to bring everyone into communion with his Son in the Spirit, by drawing them all, Jews and Gentiles together, into ‘the church, the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills all in all’(1:23).

A comparison with Colossians reveals that the first part of Paul's concluding remarks is almost identical:

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts.

– Colossians 4:7-8

Luke tells us that Tychicus was from Asia (Acts 20:4), which fits with our suggestion that Colossians was written from Ephesus. He also tells us that Tychicus accompanied Paul from Corinth to Judea, so Paul could have used him, once again, to convey this letter from Caesarea. One ancient manuscript names Tychicus as the scribe used in the writing of Ephesians.

Paul's blessing picks up two important themes of the letter. The first is 'peace'. Besides his developed treatment of these theme in 2:14-18 in which he identifies Christ as 'our peace', we recall his prayer that they keep on 'making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'(4:3), as well as the importance of their doing everything necessary to be 'ready to proclaim the gospel of peace' (6:15). In praying for their peace, Paul prays also for 'love with faith'. The letter has focused on 'God, who is rich in mercy' and on what God has done 'out of the great love with which he loved us'(2:4), through Christ, 'the Beloved'(1:6), who 'loved us and gave himself up for us'(5:2). This love is welcomed in faith. We recall Paul's prayer that 'Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love'(3:17).

In his blessing Paul also picks up the theme of 'grace'. The opening hymn sang of 'the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved'(1:6), and of 'the riches of his grace'(1:7). Paul declared: 'by grace you have been saved'(2:5), and spoke of the 'immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus'(2:7). He spoke, too, of the grace which each of them has received 'according to the measure of Christ's gift'(4:7).

²¹So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing,

Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord.

²²I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts.

²³Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁴Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁴Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's final words are remarkable. Though the reality permeates everything Paul writes, it may surprise the reader to hear that this is the only text in all his letters in which Paul uses 'love' (Greek; *agapaō*) to describe our response to Jesus. In this time of faith we are to live in communion with Christ and by his Spirit. We are to long for complete communion with him. Living his life we are to love those around us with his love. But it seems that, for Paul, loving Christ is more properly said of the communion that is beyond faith, when 'we see face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Paul speaks of 'undying love'. Perhaps, in view of this being his farewell to the Gentile communities of the east before he leaves for Rome and the west, Paul speaks of their love as 'undying' because he is thinking of eternity and our undying communion with Christ when we are raised into glory with an immortal body like his. Perhaps he is thinking of Christ now living in this state, untouched by death, and he is reflecting on the truth that Christian love, even now, causes us to transcend death, because it is our share in the resurrected life.

If Paul is indeed writing from prison in Caesarea, and if this letter is intended as a summary of his gospel and as a final gift to the Gentile Christians in the east, it could have no more fitting conclusion.

* * * * *

In Colossians Paul's reflections on the person and role of Christ in God's plan for our salvation led him to present a wonderful portrait of the church (see our final reflection on that letter). This is even more true of Ephesians. We are frequently conscious when reading Paul of his passionate concern for the unity and the catholicity of the Christian community, but nowhere else does he argue the case for both so compellingly. Nowhere else are we as aware of Paul the teacher insisting on the importance of knowing that a church, rich in diversity and all-embracing in its love, is at the heart of God's eternal design for the human race. If it was his imprisonment that gave him the space, and if it was the thought of leaving his missions in the east that gave him the motivation, and if it was the freedom from controversy or the need to attend to the questions and problems of a particular church that gave him the opportunity to reflect upon and share this conviction, we can only thank God's providence. For what we have in the extraordinary power, clarity and beauty of this letter is a most precious gift from the brilliant mind and most loving heart of this faithful apostle of Christ.