

“POWER IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER”

Ephesians 3:14-21

One of the things we always need to bear in mind when we're reading the Bible in English is that it is a translation. In fact, every version of the Bible apart from the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts is a translation. There's not really any problem with that – God can clearly speak to the reader whatever language he or she uses – but there are certain things that we need to remember. And they are issues whatever it is we are translating. You see, it's always difficult converting exactly what was said in one language into another, because words don't always match up exactly.

For example, because snow is so much more central to their lives than to ours, Eskimo (or Inuit) people have more words to describe snow than we do. So there might be a word for slushy snow and another word for firm snow and different words for snow that has been laying about for different lengths of time. In the Bible we are often told that there are three different ways of translating the single Hebrew word *ru'ach*. As we noted a few weeks ago in a morning service, it can be translated into English as “*breath*”, “*wind*”, or “*spirit*”. There are clearly close links between those three words, but sometimes you will have to make a fairly crucial choice about which you use. In *Ezekiel 37*, for example, all three words would make sense most of the time, but it would later the meaning if you used one over another.

And I am sure you have heard many, many times that in the New Testament there are three Greek words that are commonly translated as “*love*” – “*eros*”, which means erotic or sensual love; “*philadelphia*” which means a love of soft cheese or brotherly love; and “*agape*” which means sacrificial, selfless love. In the passage we've read this evening, you'll find a similar phenomenon. If you were listening you'll have heard the word “*power*” three times, and there are three different words behind that translation. (Some of the older translations do use “*might*” for the first one, it has to be said.) For those of you who need to know such things, the words in Greek are forms of “*dunamis*”, “*kratos*” and “*ischys*”. The nuances of each words are not as clear as with the words for love, but they do introduce different thoughts in this passage.

Paul is here praying for the Ephesian Christians in the light of what he said in chapter 2. Look how he starts chapter 3. He then has a long digression from 3:2-13 and comes back to what he was saying in v14, which is where we started this evening. It's all to do with being drawn together through Jesus Christ, and he says a number of things in these few verses which we could look at this evening, but we're going to concentrate on those three uses of the words for “*power*” and see what we can learn from them that will help us in our own Christian lives.

1. POWER THROUGH HIS SPIRIT (v16)

This power is a **strengthening power**. As I say, it is translated in other versions as “*might*”. Paul writes here of the Holy Spirit at work in our inner being. In other words, we have God's Spirit deep within us to strengthen us in our belief that Jesus himself “*dwells within us*”. Again, the words “*dwells*” is important. It's a word that implies that Jesus is a long-term resident, not just a lodger. Sally had a friend when she was at college. We'll call him Nick (as that was his name). Nick had finished his course, but didn't have a job and didn't want to go back to living with his parents (his dad was a vicar in Essex), so he used to move around his circle of friends. We came home one evening to find him sitting on our doorstep reading and asking if we could give him a bed for a couple of days. So he stayed with us for a couple of days – and then a couple more, and then a couple more, and soon he was actually *dwelling* with us.

And, as we're talking about translating this evening, that words “*dwells*” is in what is called the “present continuous tense”. It means that Jesus *goes on* dwelling in us, he is continually living there. So the Holy Spirit strengthens us, empowers us to believe that. It is the voice of the Spirit whispering in our ears – sometimes even shouting at us! – that helps us to be sure that we are really God's children, that we are truly disciples of Jesus. We need that power because it is often difficult for us to accept that Jesus really

is at work within us. Things happen, circumstances change, our situation becomes difficult and we may find ourselves doubting that God is there at all – as often happened with the writers of the *Psalms*. But the work of the Holy Spirit deep within is to strengthen that weak faith at such times. As we've seen in some of the recent Sunday morning sermons, all those who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour have the Holy Spirit within them, and it is in situations such as these that his power can be demonstrated.

2. POWER TOGETHER WITH THE SAINTS (v18)

This power is an **enabling power**. It is a power that is, again, given to “*all the saints*”, all the followers of Jesus Christ and it is given us to enable us to grasp fully the extent of Christ's love for us. Paul talks here of that love being wide, long, deep and high. It is, as one writer put it, **wide** enough to embrace all of humanity. When Jesus died on the cross his arms were outstretched to draw all people to him, to allow everyone to be included in that love if they wanted to be. It is **long** enough to last for all eternity. The love of Christ will never decrease. He will love us through this life and then that love will continue into infinity as we spend eternity with him. It is **deep** enough to reach the worst sinner. However much we have plumbed the depths of sin, Jesus can reach to us. He even went into hell itself to demonstrate that. No-one can ever say that they are too bad for Jesus' love to reach them. And it is **high** enough to exalt us to heaven. His saving grace reaches into the very depths and then raises to the heights of God's throne.

Now all that can be quite difficult to take in. I don't think we will ever understand that love, nor why it is shown to us. But that doesn't mean that we cannot grasp it, reach out for it and accept it, revel in it and rest in it. The love of Christ is amazing and Paul prays that those who follow him might have the power to do that, to have their vision of Christ and his love expanded in order to give them a sense of security in it and also in order to enable them to praise God for it.

But that same power also enables Christ's disciples to “*be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*” Now there's a thought! God's power at work within us can enable us to become more like Jesus Christ himself, the one who was truly filled with the fullness of God. Writing to the Colossian Christians, Paul tells them that “*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell within Jesus*”. Jesus was the image of God, the human form of God, God that we can see and feel and touch and hear. And here in *Ephesians* Paul says that we have the power to enable us to experience that too. We are to be restored to the state where we too bear the image of God as he originally intended us to. It's hard, isn't it, to live as the kind of people God really wants us to be. But as we open ourselves up to the power of God we are enabled to live Christ-like lives, lives that are full of God-ness, lives that truly reflect his image in us.

3. POWER AT WORK WITHIN US (v20)

The final mention of power in these verses is an **abundant power**. In the little doxology with which Paul rounds off this section, we learn of his power “*at work within us*”. This is an active power, a power bubbling away deep within us that powers and empowers our Christian lives. It is, as many commentators note, the power of the resurrection. And it is, as so often in Paul's writings, described in terms of abundance and generosity – “*immeasurably more*” than we might expect. God does not hold back on the gifts he gives us, he is not parsimonious with his blessings.

So this power is at work within us, God's Holy Spirit is active in our lives in ways that we cannot begin to imagine. He can do great things in us, for us and through us. In fact, he can do more than we can “*ask or imagine*”. This is power from a generous God, but also a God of surprises. I've been reading different bits of the Bible over the past few weeks for different reasons and there are promises throughout the Bible that point to God being able to astound us with his power. The prophet Habakkuk was told that he should look out because God was going to do something he wouldn't be able to believe (*Habakkuk 1:5*). The prophet Malachi told the people that God's generosity was so great they might not be able to cope

(*Malachi 3:10*). Jesus said that his followers would be able to do even greater things than he had done (*John 14:12*). And here we read again of a God who will stretch the limits of our imagination beyond anything we have ever dreamed of.

And when you read all that sort of thing, you begin to realise just how much we limit God. We try to contain him and his power within the categories and compartments that we have created. We are very suspicious of things that we cannot manage ourselves, scared of allowing God really to let rip in our lives. I'm starting to think that we ought to expect more of God, to have more faith in his power, in his ability to transform lives and situations. What we have experienced here in this church has been really wonderful over these past months – but it's only scratching the surface of what God can really do. I would like to think that as we prepare for the Alpha programmes in the autumn, as we look to new initiatives such as the Prayer Room and a revitalised youth ministry, as we look at an exciting new possibility for our outreach, as we pray for God to work in this city, we believe that God will work beyond the limits we set for him, beyond the modest expectations that we have for him, beyond anything we have seen or heard or read about.

Why? Because we want to do what Paul says here in these words – to ensure that the glory goes to God. That's how this doxology finishes. It would be wonderful if we in this church, if the people who come in here during the week, if the people who live in this community and this city could see such an outpouring of God's power that there was no alternative but to praise him. I suppose what I'm saying really, in the good, old-fashioned way that we used to speak, is that we want to see a revival in this place. God can do it. We might struggle to see how it could happen, but fortunately it's not up to us. As the hymnwriter puts it: "*God holds the key of all unknown, and I am glad; if other hands should hold the key, or if he trusted it to me, I might be sad.*" Let us acknowledge the power that we have within us – the strengthening power, the enabling power the abundant power that is the gift of a God of surprising and lavish generosity – and believe that he can do great things.

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That same power also enables Christ's disciples to "*be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*" God's power at work within us can enable us to become more like Jesus Christ himself, the one who was truly filled with the fullness of God: "*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell within Jesus*" (*Colossians 1:19*). We are to be restored to the state where we too bear the image of God as he originally intended us to.

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And Paul wants to ensure that the glory goes to God. That's how this doxology finishes. It would be wonderful if we in this church, if the people who come in here during the week, if the people who live in this community and this city could see such an outpouring of God's power that there was no alternative but to praise him.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you have times when your faith seems weak? How do you deal with that? Are you aware of the help of the Holy Spirit in that?
2. What do you think Paul means when he writes of "*being filled to the measure of the fullness of God*" ? How might we experience that?
3. Do you think we limit God and what he can do? How do we do that? How could we overcome that attitude?
4. What can we do as a church to allow God to work in and through us as he wants to?
5. Is there anything that excites you about the possibilities for God's work in this place in the near future?