

“THE MYSTERY”
Colossians 1:24-29

It will not have escaped your attention – if for no other reason than that the service is at a different time this morning – that this is the weekend of the Lichfield Mysteries. They take place every three years – or four years this time, due to a lack of funding – and can be seen today and tomorrow in the Market Square and here in this church. Based on mediaeval texts, they consist of around 24 short plays which are performed by different groups and which tell the stories of the Bible from Creation to Last Judgement. Several hundred performers will be taking part and some plays will be light-hearted and full of comedy, others will be deadly serious and very thought-provoking. If you’re interested, folk from the church here will be performing *The Kings*, *The Crucifixion* and *The Burial*, and Howard is portraying Jesus in *The Ascension*.

I don’t think anyone is entirely sure why they’re called “Mystery” plays. In the Ancient world, pagan festivals which celebrated the death and rebirth of their gods were called “Mysteries”, partly to do with the idea that the full truth of many religions was only revealed to certain “perfect” people. Other people think it might be to do with the sacramental themes that are present in the plays: the mediaeval Church referred to some aspects of the Mass and other sacraments as “sacred mysteries”. There’s also the idea that the mediaeval plays were performed by members of the trade guilds – for example, *Creation* was usually done by The Drapers and *The Slaughter of the Innocents* was usually done by the Guild of Butchers (we did try one year to get *The Flight into Egypt* sponsored by a local travel agent) – and the craft of the guilds was often referred to as the “mystery”. Then, of course, there’s the idea that these plays are all dealing with religious themes and underlying it all is the mystery of God’s purposes.

That last idea, whether or not it does actually account for the name of the Mystery Plays as we have them, was nevertheless important to St Paul. Did you notice the word cropping up in the reading we’ve just had from *Colossians*? The church at Colossae was very much affected by the pagan ideas that were current in Greek and Roman culture at the time. Particularly, there was a good deal of thinking influenced by what became known as Gnosticism – the idea that, if you wanted to get to Paradise and all that kind of things, you needed special – secret – knowledge that was granted only to a few. It was a bit of Mystery cult. Paul uses that connection to make a very important point about Christian belief, referring to it as a “mystery”.

The difference is, though, that this is not a kind of knowledge granted to only a few lucky people; it’s not a doctrine or dogma that can be accessed only by the very intelligent or the specially gifted. When Paul uses the word “mystery” here and elsewhere he uses it very much in the sense of an open secret, a

mystery that has now been revealed. For Paul the secret is now out of the bag and needs to be proclaimed as such to anyone and everyone.

This mystery has been referred to and hinted at through the words of the prophets, poets and preachers of the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. The Jewish people, particularly, had been waiting for something to happen, for someone to arrive, for Gods' purposes to be made explicit and accessible to all of them. We've caught something of that in our look at Matthew's Gospel – and it's the arrival of the Kingly Messiah, Jesus, which has now revealed this secret, this mystery. Paul talks here of his mission to "*present the word of God in all its fullness*", surely referring to Jesus, who is so often called The Word and in whom he has just said (v19) all God's fullness resides. With the arrival of Jesus, the mystery is revealed and, what's more, it's revealed to everyone. Paul writes here of its being "*made known among the Gentiles*", and that word is *ethnoi*, the Greek word for "nations" (where we get our word "ethnic" from). This news is for everyone – not just the privileged, not just the intellectuals, not even just the Jews. This is part of God's plan. Paul says that God has **chosen** to **make it known** to the **nations**.

And this is an amazing secret which is now out in the open for everyone to discover. It is full of "*glorious riches*". Once the mystery is revealed everyone can see just how amazing it is. And Paul goes on to make all that explicit in the next phrase. "*God has chosen to make known among all peoples the glorious riches of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory.***" It's this amazing idea of being at one with Jesus Christ himself. Remember how Jesus put it when he was teaching his disciples in *John 15:4*? "*Remain in me and I will remain in you*". It's a kind of symbiotic relationship whereby we're totally at one with each other – we immerse ourselves in the life of Jesus by following his teaching and example, by putting our faith wholly in him, and we find his Holy Spirit living in us, working in us and through us to deepen our desire to follow him and our understanding of his ways.

The death and resurrection of Jesus make possible that new-found relationship with him and, as Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus (in *Ephesians 1:13*), that is then sealed or guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. We can then start to appreciate what Paul means when he writes "*Christ in you*". In prayer, in reading the Bible, in listening out for what he has to say to us through his Holy Spirit, in sensing his peace, his joy, his frustration with injustice, his love for the unloved, his desire for us to get the best out of life, we deepen that relationship and experience his closeness.

And with all that comes what Paul here describes as "*the hope of glory*". That word "*hope*" has cropped up quite a bit in recent sermons, but I'll just remind us once again that when it's used in the New Testament it isn't a vague and woolly word that expresses a wish, but it describes a powerful conviction, a real assurance – when we hope in this sense, we know it will happen. So what we have to look forward

to is a racing certainty – in this case, it's the promise of glory. Fair enough – but what does Paul mean by “*glory*” here?

Well, in the thinking of St Paul – which is clearly heavily influenced by his Jewish background – glory is to do with bearing the image of God, to do with being what God originally meant us to be like. I don't think anyone's in any doubt that God is glorious – he is in heaven surrounded by glory: he radiates glory: his whole being is full of glory. And when he created this world, he created men and women “*in his image*”. In other words, we were created to share his glory, to be like him.

We know, though, that evil somehow infiltrated that good and glorious creation and things got well and truly messed up – including humanity. The glory was tarnished. The image was spoiled. That deep relationship we should have had with God was disrupted and distorted. So when Paul writes to the Christians in Rome (in *Romans 3:23*), he describes it like this: “*all have sinned* [have allowed evil to affect their lives] *and fall short of the glory of God.*” The image of God, the reflection of God's glory was lost by Adam in Eden and we have never managed to regain it.

But Jesus came into our world and, as we've seen in Matthew's Gospel, lived as a human being with all that that entailed, taught, ministered, died, lived again and was eventually, through his resurrection and ascension, glorified, restored to his previous place at the right hand of God in glory. He restored God's image in humanity and we now – amazingly – are able to share that as we live in him and he in us. He enables us finally to be what we were meant to be! Isn't that astonishing?

And what is more astonishing is that we have now – all of us: not just the Jewish people – been let in on that secret. The mystery of what it's all about, the mystery of life and eternal life, has now been revealed for everyone to see. As we accept Jesus as part of our lives, we have that sure and certain hope of enjoying eternity with him in his Kingdom – and of starting to experience that here and now.

That's the mystery, you see. And that mystery is proclaimed in the Bible – and so also, through the twenty-odd plays that will be performed here and in the Market Square later today and tomorrow. But it's also proclaimed through our lives as we live out the truth of it day by day, personally and as his people, the Church.