

Ephesians week 1

19/06/22 09:30 St Peter

Today we begin our new sermon series which, over seven weeks, is going to take us through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. You will probably know bits of that letter, but may not have thought about it as a whole. As usual, when I introduce these sermon series, I am going to take an overview of the letter, introduce the context Paul was writing from and to, and then think in a bit more detail about Chapter 1 of the letter. The Ephesians – who were they? Residents of Ephesus. But any idea where that is? You won't find it on any modern map. Think south-western Turkey, on the Aegean coast, at roughly the same latitude as Athens.

Paul's trip to Ephesus is written about in Acts ch 19. Paul went himself to Ephesus and stayed there for nearly three years. During this time the church grew and lots of small churches popped up. Paul writes this letter to the churches of Ephesus whilst he is imprisoned, possibly in Ephesus itself although we don't know that.

The letter to the Ephesian church is in 2 halves:

In the first half Paul shows how through the story of gospel – all history comes to its climax in Jesus and the creation of a multi-ethnic community of followers. In the second half of the letter Paul explores how the gospel story should affect every aspect of our lives. And in looking at these two halves of the letter contained within its six chapters, we are going to explore together how our Christian faith is rooted in our context. Paul was writing to churches in one place at one time, and we are invited to draw parallels and links to our church in this context at this time. We will think together about what is it that makes us distinct from our surrounding culture; what binds us together as followers of Jesus; and how does that influence how we are to live as Christ's body in this area?

Chapter 1 begins with Paul's usual opening salutation. One interesting point to note is that the earliest copy of this letter we still have does not name Ephesus – it says To the saints who are in .." and leaves a gap. Perhaps the person taking the letter was meant to announce to whichever town they were in. So when we read Ephesus – think region rather than place. It's a bit like the pop star walking on stage and saying "Hello Wembley (or wherever they are that night)"! The rest of Chapter 1 is a poem of praise to God. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" Paul begins. Paul praises God for the things he has done in Jesus. Paul's focus is on God's actions, in choosing us and adopting us as his children. We acclaim this at our baptism – where we acknowledge that in Christ we are washed clean of our sin and adopted as children of God. And, for those called by God, Paul uses the Greek term Ekklesia. It is the word we translate as Church, and the root behind the word ecclesiastical. Ekklesia means the gathered community of those called by God. The Church is therefore not a place, or a building, but a gathered community of people who find their common identity in Jesus Christ. As Paul's letter was read out to all those new small Christian communities, they would learn to call themselves churches, and would be encouraged to see themselves in relationship one with another. So Paul is encouraging the believers to understand what it means to be part of the Jesus community – blessed by God and chosen by God, redeemed through Christ.

Chapter 1 ends with Paul's prayer for each of the churches in that region that they will receive wisdom and hope as they discern the call of God on their lives.

Perhaps we can see the connections as one of many churches in this place, two millenia later. How often do we start with our own needs, rather than where Paul starts – by giving thanks to God for our many blessings in being called to be the Church. I wonder if we investigated, how many church groups we would find in Caversham? Whilst there are 12 formal churches, think of all the house groups and smaller gatherings of Christians working together in our community. We all have a common identity in Jesus Christ. Perhaps we ought to find out more about our sisters and brothers around this community, so that we might do more together as we seek to bless this community in God's name?

Paul writes to bless those in Ephesus. Who can we bring to mind that we want to give thanks for to God? Who has inspired our journey? And how might we be encouraged that wherever we are, in church today, or gathered at home, we are still part of the ekklesia – the Church of Jesus Christ gathered?

Paul's writing might seem very distant, in a foreign land to another people, but they speak directly to us as a church, and ask us to see ourselves in a much bigger context – as a community amongst many communities of faith.