

Ephesians week 2

26/06/22 09:30 St Peter

We come to the second week of our sermon series on Paul letter to the Ephesians. Last week we introduced the letter by looking at Chapter 1. Paul starts of his letter to the new churches in and around Ephesus – in south-west Turkey – by blessing “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” for all that he has done in Jesus Christ. He reminds the church in Ephesus – and so reminds us – that they are connected to one another as the Church (or Ekklesia) of God – bound together because of their common faith in Jesus. We are invited to see ourselves in relation to our fellow Christians in churches and groups locally, and further afield, and to prayerful acknowledge all that we have to be grateful to God for.

So we turn to Chapter 2 of the letter. In January 2021 a piece of research found that £15 billion of benefits were going unclaimed by people who were eligible. That was a slight reduction on the figure the previous year - £16 billion. But still, nonetheless £16 billion is a very big number. This is money that has been allocated to the poorest in our society – means tested benefit and tax credits, allocated to children, families and pensioners. At the height of this crisis - where too many of us are facing prices going higher and higher, and funds to pay for food, fuel and heating are reducing rapidly – knowing that so much government funding goes unclaimed is depressing, if not scandalous. Charities working with the poorest on our society – including Church Action on Poverty – have appealed for people to go to the Citizens Advice Bureau for a consultation. But before you rush out, I don't think they're open on Sundays!

There is another kind of benefit that goes unclaimed. This is the knowledge that we are loved by God. Which is theme of Chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. Christians are those who know that they are loved and called by God. Well, at least in theory! Too many of us, however, believe like the Jews at Paul's time, that we are reconciled with God by our works. If you like, that it is through working harder, by doing more good things for God, that we are saved. Or we might believe that we are reconciled with God by having enough faith.

But St Paul writes to the Ephesians that we are saved by the grace of God. And by the word 'grace' he means the free giving away of God's love. Most Jews in Jesus and Paul's day thought that you had to earn God's love by working 24hrs a day and keeping to every letter of Hebrew law defined in the Old Testament. In fact, they lectured non-Jews that they had no chance of receiving the promises God had promised to the Jews, because they hadn't earned them. But Paul, who knew that Jewish understanding, but who has now met and been redeemed by God in Jesus, tell the Ephesians that God's love is given away free, recklessly. All you have to do is apply for it – not through a complicated form, but through a prayer – to be filled with the love you need; given the spiritual strength you need, and to trust him that he wants to give it to you. And the term for that trusting prayer to God is 'faith'. We need to trust only one thing, Paul suggests: that God loves us.. “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not you own doing; it is the gift of God”.

In a world that is more factious than perhaps many can remember, and in a society where we feel under significant pressure and where Government often seems to be rudderless, we can all too easily grasp around for something to rely on. Paul empresses on the church in Ephesus, the need to remember that we – whether Jew, Gentile (whatever our background) – are offered the free love of God. We have been brought near to God through God's own actions in Jesus. This is our unclaimed benefit – priceless in terms of dignity and self-respect, courage, moral strength and hope for the future. Just waiting for us to ask for it!