**Morning Praise @ Home 11th February 2024**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Reading Ephesians 1: 15 – 23

**Reflection from Sue LOOK UP**

A couple of years ago, I watched a film called *Don’t Look Up*. Its premise was that two astronomers realised that the path of a comet meant it was due to collide with planet earth. It was a huge truth they became increasingly desperate that earth’s inhabitants recognised. Yet the reaction of many was to keep their eyes firmly fixed on the life they knew, politicians and media influencers clinging to the power they currently wielded.

It is easy for us all to keep to the familiar, in step with our culture, but in Paul’s the letter to the churches he’d founded in Ephesus and the area around it, he is saying: LOOK UP! Be amazed at the incredible truth of God’s love for us, what he’s put in place for us, his plans for us! He is writing ‘to expand the horizons of his readers.’

Yet we are coming to this vision from a culture that focuses not on God but on us. Nowadays, so many photos of incredible landscapes are actually selfies, as the photographer puts themselves firmly in the middle. Even in Christian circles, we often focus on how *we* *feel* about God, our choice to follow Christ.

A Londoner called Mark, who hit a crisis in his life, reflected: ‘I discovered that I had been so focused on my life that I hadn’t realised that God was even there. All I could see was what was right in front of me, but when I started to look up higher and higher, I realised just how powerful God really was. When I chose to look up, I saw something other than myself, and He was just what I needed.’

Last Sunday, on the earlier part of Chapter 1, we heard how God has taken the initiative. It is God who reaches out. He is front and centre – He has done everything that is necessary for us to thrive.

Paul wants us to grasp this, and so he prays in v.18-19 what the *Message* version translates as asking:

‘the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!’

The first priority for Paul is that we come to know Jesus personally. When we moved to the Wirral in 2022, we knew we needed to get to know folk and make new friends. What did that involve?

* It meant starting to attend activities we saw others doing, getting involved in shared encounters.
* It meant talking to individuals, discovering what they thought - often over a coffee.
* By spending time in their company, we could notice the way they operated.
* Above all, listening carefully to these new acquaintances, discerning what really mattered to them.

If this is a way of making friends, how might this translate to deepening our intimacy with Jesus?

* Involving ourselves in a shared encounter? – think church and small groups, where we can worship and learn together what Christ is like.
* We get to know Jesus by talking to him – in prayer.
* Spending time encountering Him through reading and pondering the Bible – making that as regular as getting dressed – means we come to understand how God operates.

This is all stuff that *we* can put in place, but for the acquaintance to truly deepen depends on the action of the Holy Spirit, given to all who follow Jesus. Knowing Christ is about head knowledge (what Paul calls ‘wisdom’) but also experiential, ‘heart’ knowledge, the ‘revelation’ of Jesus’ impact. And it is the Holy Spirit who helps us really listen carefully and hear the Lord, then translate what we understand into how we behave.

What we believe shapes how we behave.

* On walks, our Labrador Oscar is a great tail wagger, assuming that any other dog he meets could be a potential friend.
* We want to bring our kids up to be equally confident, trusting that they are of worth themselves and worth knowing, believing the best of others until there is evidence to prove otherwise. It is this which will enable them to take opportunities, to meet new people and situations with a smile. Believing they can do something means that they probably can!

In v.18 Paul prays that we will ‘know the hope to which [God] has called [us]’. He is not talking about that kind of dubious ‘Well, I hope it won’t rain (but it probably will)’, but a sure and certain thing that we can definitely trust will happen, just as our children are confident that Christmas will definitely arrive in December.

Our hope is the destination that God has designed for those who put their faith in His Son – that, one day:

* we absolutely will be holy, really will reflect Jesus without blemish;
* that we’ll no longer be subject to sin and death but victorious over it;
* that we will live for ever in total communion with the Godhead and with every other believer, enjoying peace, illuminated by perfect love.

This, reminds Paul, is our sure and certain destination, so we need to move forward believing it.

After all, it is a hope which we are being ‘called’ to.

* In other words, we are not meant to be static but actively engaged in walking forwards on God’s path, just as the first disciples walked alongside Jesus.
* And we need to remember that, when Jesus called his disciples, he was deliberately choosing particular individuals. Now, because we have decided to believe in Christ, we have in turn been chosen, specially selected to be on God’s team!

We are to be assured that we have this future, but not arrogant about being individually special, somehow ‘deserving’ God’s attention. No. God comes first: we have been chosen for the sake of what God wants to accomplish through us; we are called to shine His light and love to the world. Paul is pointing us to the larger story in which every single Christian life is set; it’s not all about us, but about His great plan.

Next, Paul prays in v.18 that we may ‘know .. the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints’, or, as the *Message* puts it: ‘grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers.’ God is lavishly generous, not a Scrooge, begrudging His gifts. Nothing is withheld. Christians are marked by the presence of God’s Holy Spirit within us, a sign both that God is with us now and that there is more to come.

So rather than get discouraged by our current failings, we need to LOOK UP to the ascended, enthroned Jesus. Because *He* is our representative, this is *our* inheritance.

And if we’re still wavering, Paul reminds us that it doesn’t depend on our power to reach our destination, but on God’s strength within us, the enabling presence of His Holy Spirit. Remember that reference to God’s ‘endless energy, boundless strength!’

The Holy Spirit works miracles and can answer prayer dramatically – but we shouldn’t be discouraged if that is not our regular personal experience:

‘Many of the things which God’s power achieves in us, such as putting secret sins to death and becoming people of prayer, remain hidden from the world and even, sometimes, from other Christians,’ writes theologian Tom Wright.

But He IS at work in us, always seeking our co-operation with His restoration work. Our greed, our bad habits, addictions or abusive tongue may be beyond us to change, but they are not beyond the boundless strength of God.

As evidence, Paul reminds the young churches of the events three decades earlier, when the mutilated corpse of Jesus was not only resurrected back to earthly life, but then lifted to the highest throne, where all powers were made subject to Him and He was made Head over everything.

What holds sway in today’s culture? Prime ministers, yes, Monarchs, a little, Presidents, certainly. What else? – social media, the internet generally, the forces of consumerism; or, if you’ve watched a lot of *Line of Duty*, Organised Crime Groups; targeted anger, violent aggression such as we’re seeing each night in the news; fear holds sway, A.I. is increasingly powerful – God’s enemy delights in wielding these forces.

But every one of them will be under Christ’s feet when God’s great plan moves into its next phase. Meanwhile, that ‘incomparably great power’ which exalted God’s Son, has been made available by the Holy Spirit for all ‘who believe’.

So LOOK UP! Look up and worship! Let’s start living like we know we’re going to win. Let us have confidence in God. Don’t let’s be discouraged by a culture or mindset that regards Christians as weak, because in Him we know we are strong.

To conclude, why not pray Paul’s prayer for ourselves:

‘Glorious Father, give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that we may know You better.

We pray that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened in order that we may know

* the hope to which you have called us
* the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints
* and your incomparably great power for us who believe.’

**AMEN**

**Affirmation of faith**

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession**

We pray for the church that her people may faithfully and joyfully proclaim the majesty, glory and love of God and his Beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

We pray for the world in all its beauty and its brokenness asking God to give us the wisdom and the desire to be faithful stewards of his creation.

Creator God, as we pray for your world we ask that you take from us all hatred and prejudice.  Give us the spirit of love, for all people whatever their race or creed and give the same spirit of acceptance to all world leaders that through mutual understanding and common endeavour peace and prosperity may be increased throughout the world.

Father we pray for peace and justice for all who are suffering because of war and unrest.

Lord, teach us to see the face of Christ in everyone we meet. We thank you for the community of which we are part; for those who share with us in its activities, and for all who serve its interests. Help us, as we have the opportunity, to make our own contribution to the life of the whole and to learn to be good neighbours, that by love we may serve one another, for the sake of your son, Jesus Christ.

We pray for all who minister your word. We pray for our bishops, priests and lay readers that they bring your word to everyone.

Lord, send the light of Christ into the darkness of those who are in need or distress today. Reassure those who suffer that nothing, no power in the sky above, or in the earth below, indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from your love, which will stay with us always as an ever-present help in times of trouble.

Lord, help us to stand alongside those who mourn the loss of loved ones. Let us be there for them and be a support in their time of need.

As we approach the beginning of Lent we pray that we can take time to step aside from the business of daily life and spend more time with you in prayer and contemplation of all you have done for us.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**