

Sunday 5th January 2025

'Together we stand'. Tom Yacomeni

Ephesians 1v1-14 You are Chosen

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

One of the interesting features to appear on the BBC over the past week was a review of the programme 'Tomorrow's World' back in 1995 and its predictions for the world in 2025. They got some things right like the advancements in health care, genetic screening and more robotic surgery. They were a bit too optimistic about commercial space travel and mining asteroids (even though there has been a flurry of commercial space activity in the last 10 years).

They were right about the automation of banking, but again too optimistic about self-driving cars. But as Heraclitus said, *the only certainty is change* and the last few decades have seen enormous changes in communication and productivity. Fundamentally though, I think people still remain the same. Humanity continues to search for love, meaning and purpose and the Church's message is no less relevant today than it was 30 years ago.

Back in 1995 I was newly married, living in Cheltenham and going along to the town centre Church called Holy Trinity. Mims and I got involved with the youth work there and helped launch a monthly Saturday worship event which was called 'The Path'. Little did I know that one of those who would come along to The Path and encounter the Lord in a life-changing way was a young man called Philip Lauder. Well 30 years later, what a joy it is that Phil will be telling that story and sharing his testimony here at All Saints this evening. I hope you will be able to come and hear him!

Technology may change, society may change, but whether we see it or not God's kingdom is advancing and he is working his purposes out with every year that passes. If you had told me thirty years ago I would be Rector at All Saints where Tim Watson was ministering, with Phil Lauder preaching I would have thought you were nuts!

But it is no accident that we are here together this morning. God has greater plans for you, for all of us here at All Saints and for his whole church across the world. As we head into 2025, I want us to focus on the joy and the exciting blessings that are ours in Christ for our future ahead.

And this is exactly the way the Apostle Paul began his letter to the churches at Ephesus when he wrote to them between 60-64 AD, just 30 years after the pivotal moment of history when Jesus lived, died and rose again.

After his initial greetings Paul begins his letter with an epic prayer of praise to God for his glorious, lavish grace, giving thanks for the forgiveness and blessings poured out through Jesus Christ. In the original text it is one giant long sentence, as though Paul cannot even draw breath because he is so overwhelmed by the goodness of God and his love for each one of us.

And yet the irony is, he is writing from a prison cell, confined to a cold dark room after shipwrecks, snakebites, violence, betrayal and persecution.

Whatever it is that Paul has got, we need a good big dose of that in our day too. It is easy to get weighed down by anxiety and worries about the future. The media thrives on negative speculation and our advanced interconnectedness often serves to amplify the uncertainties that sap our energy and leave us drained.

So what a counterpoint it is to launch 2025 by declaring this along with Paul:

Praise God we are so blessed!

God has chosen you and me to live in this particular time and place, lavishing his grace and power on us so that we can live glorious and Godly lives as we follow Christ, forgiven and free.

He knows the challenges we will face – it is part of his plan for us to work it out together. And the Holy Spirit is here to lead and guide us every day until we're called to an even better eternity.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Fruitful discipleship starts with the knowledge that you did not choose God, he chose you specifically, for such a time as this.

When the first disciples heard Jesus what is it that made Peter and Andrew leave their nets and follow him? Why did they risk their livelihoods and their family inheritance?

Matthew 4v18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

Jesus chose them.

Usually students would apply to learn at the feet of a Rabbi. But instead Jesus actually chose his *talmidim*. They were ordinary work-a-day fishermen, but something about being with Jesus was more attractive and more exhilarating than building a bigger boat or growing a bigger business.

In that one decisive moment on the beach, they went from being casual observers to active disciples. How do we know their response was genuine?

They left their nets behind.

It makes we wonder what do we need to leave behind in 2025? What is your safety net? Is it your sense of control over your own destiny, your financial security, your respectable reputation or even your regular routine?

God has chosen us and says 'come follow me and I will make you into the people I chose you to be, the people I have destined you to be.'

Not only are we selected and called, but God also promises to do the work of transformation in our lives if we will only open the door and allow him. 'Be transformed' wrote Paul, 'By the renewing of your minds.'

Verse 7 celebrates the fact that we can receive redemption and forgiveness on a personal level, but in verse 10 Paul reaches the summit of his prayer of praise with a mountaintop vision, the divine plan once shrouded in mystery but now on glorious display: That God intends to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

That means that Christian faith is not just about personal salvation, but it is actually about growing in unity and maturity *together*.

This sermon series is called 'Together we stand' because Ephesians is all about the need for the church to come together in unity, with all of us seeking the Lord and each one using our gifts to build one another up and engage in the struggle, a struggle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

You cannot be an effective follower of Jesus in isolation. We need each other in order to really grow in discipleship and see Christ at work. I need you to help me grow in faith this year. We all need each other's help.

Back in November Tim Dobson came to speak at our staff and PCC away day and there was a palpable sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit as he talked about discipleship. The thing that particularly resonated with me and for many of the PCC as he spoke was the need to recognise that there is no difference between discipleship and evangelism. At the great commission Jesus told us to go and make *disciples* of all nations, baptising them and teaching them everything he commanded.' Our job is to keep pointing people towards Jesus, however near or far they may be from him. The goal of discipleship is the same for all of us – to get closer to Jesus, asking for his help, seeking his presence and knocking on the doors of gracious opportunity and service.

But in our thinking about discipleship we often leave out the last bit of the great commission: 'teaching them to obey everything I commanded'. Dallas Willard called this 'The great omission'. I noted Kris Valloten wrote recently 'many believers have sought the benefits of his Kingdom, but have forgotten the call to a righteous lifestyle.'

Tim Dobson said it's not just about seeing Jesus as our saviour, but acknowledging him as Lord. 'If I am going to live my life for Jesus, then the LORDSHIP of Jesus is paramount. This needs to be at the heart of church life.'

So we are calling for 2025 to be a year of discipleship – looking for each of us to grow in our understanding of what the Lordship of Christ means in our particular context and regularly wrestling with two questions:

- What is Jesus saying to you?
- What are you doing about it?

Answering these two simple questions are the goal of discipleship and we need each other's help to figure that out – whether in our close friendships, in our home group, in our congregation, or as part of the wider church in our nation.

So that is why we're starting with Ephesians which unpacks some of the practicalities of identity, calling, relationships, gifts, community and spiritual warfare, and then in the run up to Easter we are going to look again at some of the spiritual disciplines which keep us anchored in Christ and resisting the pressure to conform to the world.

Sound good?

Let's stand together.