



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA
DBH Series No 41, November 2008

Monastic Voices

“No one has known Christ better than Paul, nor has anyone surpassed him in the example he gave of what anyone should be who bears Christ's name. So perfectly did he mirror his Master that he became his very image. He was transformed into his model, so that it seemed to be no longer Paul who lived and spoke, but Christ himself living in Paul. His words *Since you seek a proof that it is Christ who speaks in me*, and, *It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me*, show his keen awareness of this grace. Paul teaches us the meaning of Christ's name when he calls him: The power and wisdom of God, our peace, the unapproachable light in which God dwells, our sanctification and redemption, our great High Priest, our paschal sacrifice, our expiation; when he declares him to be the reflection of God's glory, the perfect likeness of his nature, the Creator of all ages, our spiritual food and drink, the rock and the water, the foundation of our faith, the cornerstone, the image of the invisible God. He shows what Christ's name means when he says that he is the mighty God, the Head of his Body the Church, the firstborn of the new creation, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, the firstborn from the dead, the eldest of many brethren; and when he tells us that Christ is the mediator between God and man, the only-begotten Son crowned with glory and honour, the Lord of glory, the beginning of all things, the King of justice and of peace, the King of the whole universe, the ruler of a realm that has no boundaries. Paul calls Christ by many other titles too numerous to mention. Their cumulative force when taken together gives some conception of what the name 'Christ' really means, and shows us his inexpressible majesty, in so far as our minds can comprehend it. Since by the goodness of God we who are called Christians have been granted the honour of sharing this name - the greatest, the highest, the most sublime of all names - each of the titles that explains its meaning should have its reflection in us. If we are not to be false to this name we must bear witness to it by our lives.”

From: On Christian Perfection by St Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330 - c. 395)

“*We have been predestined by the decree of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we may be the praise of his glory*’ (Eph 1:11-12). It is St. Paul who tells us this, St. Paul who was instructed by God himself. How do we realise this great dream of the heart of our God, this immutable will for our souls? In a word, how do we correspond to our vocation and become perfect praises of glory of the Most Holy Trinity?

In Heaven each soul is a praise of the glory of the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, for each soul is established in pure love and lives no longer its own life but the life of God. Then it knows him, St. Paul says, as it is known by him. St. John of the Cross affirms that the soul surrendered to love, through the strength of the Holy Spirit, is not far from being raised to this state even here below. This is what I call a perfect praise of glory!

A praise of glory is a soul that lives in God, that loves him with a pure and disinterested love, without seeking itself in the sweetness of this love; that loves him beyond all his gifts. A praise of glory is a soul of silence that remains like a lyre under the mysterious touch of the Holy Spirit so that he may draw forth from it divine harmonies. A praise of glory is a soul that gazes at God in faith and simplicity. It is a reflector of all that he is. Finally, a praise of glory is one who is always giving thanks.

In the heaven of her soul, a praise of glory has already begun her work of eternity. Her song is uninterrupted, for she is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who effects everything in her, and although she is not always aware of it, for the weakness of nature does not allow her to be established in God without distractions, she always sings, she always adores, for she has, so to speak, wholly passed over into praise and love in her passion for the glory of her God. In the heaven of our soul let us be praises of glory of the Holy Trinity, praises of love of our Immaculate Mother.”

From Heaven in Faith, a 10 day retreat written for her sister by Bl. Elisabeth of the Trinity, Dijon Carmel, 1906

“St. Paul pushed his Greek to its furthest limit when he attempted to explain to the Ephesians what a profound immersion in God is like. Referring to the love of Christ that surpasses all human knowing, the apostle longed for the recipients of his letter to be ‘filled with the utter fullness of God’. This staggering statement is incapable of exaggeration. Yet he goes on to remark that God’s working in us ‘can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine’. Infinitely more! If anyone is tempted to think either that later mystics are overstating what occurs in the transforming union or that this summit is not for everyone, I would simply invite the doubter to stop, to re-read Ephesians 3:19-20, and then to think about it seriously for five uninterrupted minutes.”

From: Fire Within: SS. Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and the Gospel on Prayer by Thomas Dubay S.M.

Dear Oblates and friends,

I said in my last letter that I wanted to mark this year of St. Paul by commenting for you on one of his Epistles. I started on Ephesians, but didn’t get further than the single verse of the opening blessing (Eph 1:3). So now I take up where I left off: though I shan’t get very far even in this letter. If I can get to the end of the first Chapter I’ll be doing very well.

Some general comments

Ephesians is known as one of the “Captivity” epistles, written from prison, towards the end of St. Paul’s life. Several themes and passages in it are to be found in the same or similar words in Colossians. The scholars presume that Colossians was written first, then portions of it were later re-worked into this letter. Some suggest that this process might not have been done by Paul at all. While it is true that the place of Ephesians in our canon of scripture is not dependent on integral Pauline authorship, it seems easier to assume that Paul did write it. Otherwise we must imagine a completely unknown contemporary, who happened to be as great a theological genius as Paul. This anonymous writer, we must believe, boldly claimed Paul’s apostolic authority, and was everywhere, at once and without question accepted as genuine. Personally I’ve never found the arguments against Pauline authorship based on style and content very convincing, so I shall simply assume it henceforth.

We refer to this letter as “Ephesians”, but the word “Ephesus” is lacking in the earliest manuscripts. Probably then Paul meant it from the first to be a general Encyclical for the whole Church. Perhaps he deliberately left a blank space for the name of each particular Church to be filled in at the top. Very early on the word “Ephesus” was put in, and it stuck.

The theme of Ephesians is the mystery of Christ, and our immersion into that mystery. It’s about God’s eternal plan, for the whole Church and for each of us, and what our response to that should be. It’s about the Fatherhood of God, the Lordship of Christ, and life in the Spirit. Ephesians is about our vocation to the fullness of the Christian life: that is, to mystical union with God in Christ. So it’s a letter especially for contemplatives and mystics: what we are all called to become. From the earliest times monks have found this letter to be an inspiration and programme for their way of life.

Often the sentences in Ephesians are grammatically overloaded, as if Paul’s thought is so brimming over that it can’t be contained within ordinary bounds. He struggles to express what is beyond expression: he speaks of the *unfathomable riches of Christ* (3:8), or the *love of Christ that is beyond knowledge* (3:19); he heaps up words like *superabundant*, or *super-eminent*; or invents new words like *con-vivified* or *con-raised up* or *con-sat down*

(2:5-6). Throughout his tone is of gratitude, wonder, praise, blessing; he's always wanting to give glory to God, even as he teaches us how that glory has been manifested and communicated to us in Christ. Of course Paul speaks of the humility, meekness and gentleness proper to any Christian; but much more dominant in this letter is his proclamation of the strength, power and riches that are ours in Christ. There's nothing weak or half hearted or mediocre in Ephesians: nor should there be in our Christian lives.

When Paul touches on matters he's already discussed in earlier letters, writing now presumably in his full maturity, he tends to treat them from a somewhat different perspective. It's good for us to be aware of these differences as we read. So the Christ of Ephesians is not so much presented as the one who humbled himself at the Incarnation (Phil 2:7), or who hung on the Cross (1 Cor 1:23), or who will come again at the end of time (1 Thess 4:15). Instead the focus here is above all on Christ as the Ascended Lord; Christ reigning even now in glory over the whole cosmos. And Paul cries out to us that with this Lord in glory we are already in a real sense united; sharing with him even now his victory and his divine Sonship and the gift of the Spirit; placed with him even now over all the angels, both good and bad. As regards the Church: in his earlier letters Paul tended to speak of particular local Churches, as present in a city or area or even house (cf. Romans 16:5). In Ephesians he always speaks of the Universal Church, with its two components of Jews and Gentiles now perfectly united as one. This Church as a whole is made one with Christ, as a body is with its head, or as stones are incorporated into a building, or as spouses in marriage are made one flesh with one another.

Paul never uses the word "Trinity" in this or any of his letters, yet the reality of the Trinity is everywhere apparent, and Ephesians is particularly rich in trinitarian formulations. To give one or two examples: *May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you the Spirit of wisdom & revelation in knowledge of him (1:17). Through him we both have access in the one Spirit to the Father (2:18). In him you are built up into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit (2:22).* Alternatively, Paul loves to pile up suggestive trinities of expression. For example: *there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (4:5-6).*

The Opening Hymn

After the initial greeting, and the opening blessing, Paul launches into a hymn of praise, verses 4-14. This is all one sentence: the longest in the New Testament, and lacking any main verb! It's a torrential outpouring, an ecstatic song that unfolds the blessing of verse 3, and is in turn unfolded in the rest of the letter. It's in free poetic form, because plain prose could never capture the exhilarating truth Paul has seen and understood: yet it's also a deliberate teaching, full of precise and sober theology. In the manner of the Psalms, Paul praises God by recounting the mighty works he has done on behalf of his chosen people. But rather like St. John in the Prologue to his Gospel, Paul's gaze is lifted higher than historical events, higher than creation itself; as high indeed as God himself. Paul here gazes into the infinite horizon of God's mercy and goodness; into the mystery of God's plan and purpose, the good pleasure of his will, established from all eternity; the plan that is forever centred in Christ, and in Christ's sacrificial death for us (v. 7). This is a text to pray; to learn by heart if possible; to chew over slowly phrase by phrase. We should note that it begins with God the Father; its central section dwells on God the Son, and it ends with God the Holy Spirit. Three times, like a refrain, almost like a tolling bell, Paul explains the "why?" of it all by repeating the phrase so beloved of Blessed Elisabeth of the Trinity: *"to the praise of the glory of his grace"* (v. 6) *"that we might be to the praise of his glory"* (v. 12) *"to the praise of his glory"* (v. 14).

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world (v. 4). "O Christian", cried St. Leo the Great (+461), "recognise your dignity!" Can a greater dignity be imagined? We have been known by God, loved by God, chosen by God, from all eternity: not because we are good, but because in looking at his Son, God has always seen us who belong to him. Can we ever ponder this mystery enough? Do we live as if we knew it were true? Are we ready to tell others about it? St. Irenaeus (c. 130-c.200) asked the question: Why did God create the Universe at all? His answer: in order to pour out his blessings. Above all, God created the world in order to pour out on us the blessings we receive in Christ. It's good to remember here the figure of Adam, who is ever in the background of Paul's thought here. All of us are "in Adam", our first father and therefore our true representative. All sinned in him and in him forever forfeited God's friendship. Yet in God's plan our being "in Christ" is more fundamental. Before ever Adam fell, God already knew all he would do to bring glory out of that fall. His plan was sure, and it was all nothing but a working out of blessing and grace and love poured out.

...that we might be holy and immaculate in his sight in love (v. 4). Paul here uses the language of Old Testament sacrifice. To be fit expressions of worship, sacrificial animals had to be clean and without blemish. They were then set aside, consecrated as gifts for God. Now Paul tells us: we were made clean and holy by the blood of

Christ; we are able to give God fit and acceptable worship. To do that we have to be consecrated for him, and freed from the defects of sin: nothing less will do. In case we find that too daunting a project, we recall that the Church of which we are members is already holy and immaculate. Mary is. Our vocation is to become what we already are by our baptism, and what we will be in heaven: above all by returning love for love.

...who predestined us into the adoption of sons (v. 5). People rather rarely nowadays speak about the mystery of predestination. Doubtless there is a fear of raking up the often sterile controversies of the past, or of putting people off with doctrine that's hard to understand. Yet this mystery is at the heart of the Gospel. Blessed Elisabeth of the Trinity (1880-1906) pondered it with ever deeper spiritual insight; for her it was a never failing source of joy and encouragement. Without wasting time speculating over who is predestined and who isn't, she understood that the Church is predestined, just as Christ was predestined. God the Father never thought of the incarnate Son apart from his Bride the Church; never indeed thought of me apart from my destiny to share his Son's glory. It's not a question of who manages to avoid hell: it's about God creating me in order that I might share his divine life. This can only be the result of sheer grace, sheer un-merited gift; God's completely free and blessed choice; his utterly sovereign goodness. Elisabeth wrote in her celebrated Prayer: *Reproduce in me, as it were, an incarnation of the Word, that I may be to him a superadded humanity, wherein he may renew all his mystery! Father... behold in me none other than your beloved Son, in whom you are well pleased.*

...into the praise of the glory of his grace (v. 6). This tells us why God made us and called us; why Christ died and rose again; why Paul wrote this letter. God has communicated and revealed his loving plan for us; Paul has set it out for us; it's for us to respond in praise. There's nothing abject about this praise. On the contrary, in this praise our dignity has its highest expression; in it we share the joy of the Angels. Our praise is indeed a graced participation in the loving praise each of the Trinitarian Persons eternally pours out to the others. It's supremely good for us; in it we find the complete fulfilment of our quest for happiness. As St. Augustine (354-430) wonderfully prayed at the beginning of his *Confessions*: "You stir us to delight in praising you: for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." If this is the vocation of each person, how much more must it be of each Benedictine monk and oblate! To return again for a moment to Blessed Elisabeth: she wanted to be, already here on earth, what she knew she would be in heaven: a praise of God's glory. So she took that phrase "*laudem gloriae*" as an extra name. "One day the veil will fall" she wrote, "we will be introduced into the eternal courts, and there we will sing in the bosom of infinite love. And God will give us the new name promised to the Victor (Apoc 2:17). What will it be? '*Laudem gloriae* - Praise of glory!'"

Restrictions of time and space force me to skip a great deal: including lines of Paul very worthy of exposition. But you will easily fill in the details yourself. Let me just comment briefly now on two more verses from the opening hymn:

...making known to us the mystery of his will (v. 9) This is essential. We can't give God fitting praise if we're merely ignorant of what he's done for us, and of what he's called us to. Nowadays everybody wants to affirm that non-Christians can be saved. In support of this, some have suggested that it really doesn't matter whether we know about Christ or not: maybe even that we are better off not knowing. But this is nonsense. It matters greatly that we know: that we hear the Gospel in its fullness. Christ's death wasn't just some legal fiction, whereby we're let off punishment, but otherwise unaffected. God made us, unlike the animals, to share his own self knowledge, and to respond to his love. As Jesus himself declared: "*Eternal life is this, to know you the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*" (John 17:3).

...you have been sealed with the holy Spirit of the promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance (vv. 13-14). It's remarkable what weight Paul habitually put on the experience of the Holy Spirit among his converts. For him, this is sufficient proof of the truth of his Gospel. We pray that it may be the common experience of believers also in our own day. As I said in my last letter, if we have the Holy Spirit we have all that God has to give us. Yet this gift is only as it were the pledge, or first installment, of what is to come. So our redemption is both already achieved, and yet to be accomplished. Here we have it in mystery, in faith, amid many trials. In heaven it will be ours in all its fullness.

A little bit more

I shall have to return to Ephesians in my next letter, and cover much more ground much more rapidly. I find it hard to do so, since there's so much to be said about it all! Let me end now by just touching on Paul's prayer which follows immediately on from his opening Hymn (1:15-23). He will pray for his readers again in Chapter 3:15-19.

Paul begins his prayer by thanking God for his readers' faith and love (1:15). He then goes on to pray that we open ourselves fully to hope: that we understand what is the hope that is ours. *May you know what is the hope of your calling; what are the riches of glory of his inheritance among the saints* (1:18). This must be the prayer of the Abbot for his monks; of the oblate master for the oblates; of all of us for one another. If we have this hope, this knowledge, then we have the ever living inspiration we need to keep on striving for holiness of life; to be endlessly generous in the living out of our vocation; to endure all things, however hard, without loss of inner peace and joy. The purpose of my oblate letter now is really to urge you to take St. Paul's tremendous vision here very seriously; never to be content with anything less than this thrilling prospect he holds out; to have great confidence in the heavenly goal he points towards.

Do you feel all this is too much for you? that you haven't the strength to live up to it? Well, Paul goes on: *...may you know ... what is the surpassing greatness of his power at work in us who believe* (v. 19). We have something much better than our own strength to rely on. How should we understand what God's power is? The Psalmist in the Old Testament rejoiced in the help that came to him from the God *who made heaven and earth* (Psalm 123/4:8). If we have on our side, at work within us, the very power that made all things from nothing: that is indeed grounds for great confidence. But we Christians have greater grounds for confidence even than that. According to the admirable Ronald Knox translation (1946) of verses 19 - 20: *Measure it by that mighty exercise of power which he shewed when he raised Christ from the dead, and bade him sit at his right hand above the heavens...* So: what Paul is talking about is not just ordinary divine power, as it were, but that power particularly that turned history upside down; the power that brought life out of death, victory out of defeat, holiness out of sin, hope out of despair, salvation out of condemnation. This power - supernatural, miraculous, wholly divine - is ever at work in us, certainly able to draw even us to glory. It cannot possibly fail. Do we have total confidence in it? Do we ever rejoice in it, thank God for it, draw upon it?

To be continued....
