

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 11 July 2021

Lord God, help us to know your ways; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you, we wait all day long. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Blessed assurance from the beginning

The readings from Ephesians 1 and Mark 6 are dealing with one of the important themes – blessings of God from the beginning. In Ephesians 1:3-14, we hear that God’s blessings are given to us in Christ before the foundation of the world. In Mark 6:14-29, we learn that blessings of God are still working in the world through persecutions and obstacles. Last, it is assured that the church is called to sustain the community and the world with these blessings even through our frailties and weaknesses.

God’s blessings given to us in Christ

A long time ago, a passionate Christian asked me when I was saved in Jesus Christ. At that time, I was just a Sunday churchgoer. I knew I was saved. But I wasn’t sure when I was saved exactly – in terms of the time, day or year. Would the date of my baptism be the exact date of my salvation? Or when I acknowledged that Jesus Christ was/is my saviour through my lips and in my heart, was the moment my salvation time? But in the course of my faith journey, I learned that baptism together with the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as my saviour, are all part and parcel of this powerful statement in Ephesians 1:3-4 in that we were elected to be saved in Christ even before the foundation of the world!

The letter to the Ephesians begins with praise to God for having chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world. The author emphasizes that it is done by God’s grace. God who chose us to be holy and blameless destined us for adoption as his children. Adoption enables us to obtain the same inheritance that Christ Jesus had. In ancient times, adoption was not uncommon. Especially among the elite, if a person didn’t have children or if their children died, adoption allowed them to have an heir. The adopted person gained social status through association with the parent’s social status. They gained wealth through their inheritance, and they were benefitted from the social and political connections of their parent. In return, the adopted child honoured the parent by taking the parent’s name and being loyal to them.

So the adoption mentioned here is quite unique. First, it is not the adoption of an individual but a people (e.g. Jews). Second, the adoptive parents are not humans but God. Further adoption is not affected by the quality or characters of the adopted people as God has chosen a people for God's self.¹ Now the author, as a Jew, is talking about living together as one God's family in the midst of human differences to whose audience is largely Gentiles. Through the Jews who were adopted first, Gentiles also became partakers of these blessings. In Christ the formerly existed hostility between them² is removed as they become one in Christ. As the letter indicates later, living with differences requires effort: it takes humility, gentleness, and patience.³ For Gentiles who became one family of God, the author also emphasized their hopelessness prior to Christ's coming, as they had no hope and without God in the world.⁴ Although all these blessings of salvation are solely by the grace of God, it doesn't mean the present moral status or actions of Christians are irrelevant. Quite the contrary! Part of our election involves being 'holy and blameless before him in love,'⁵ and our new life in Christ is 'for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.'⁶ As a result, we are now those who 'hope in Christ' and who 'live for the praise of his glory.'⁷ Yet, those living in the blessings of God are not exempted from the powers of the world.

God's blessings continually flow through obstacles

The death of John the Baptist is placed between the commission and the return of the twelve disciples. In doing so, Mark relayed the story of John and Herod as a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death by the hands of a political figure. As we heard the story of the rejection of Jesus at home, now we see that not only did John's message meet with political obstacles, so would Jesus' and so would his followers.' John's declaration of the unlawfulness of Herod's marriage to Herodias may also be shared by Jesus.⁸ From this passage, we can see what Herod's views of the Jesus' movement were. Unlike others who thought that Jesus was a prophet, Herod thought that Jesus was a resurrected John. As such, Jesus' continual activity was viewed by the powers as the one intimately associated with John's. At this stage, a question may arise. What

¹ See other examples – Deuteronomy 7:6, Psalm 135:4, Isaiah 41:8, Ephesians 1:7, 14

² Ephesians 2:14

³ Ephesians 4:2-3

⁴ Ephesians 2:11-12

⁵ Ephesians 1:4

⁶ Ephesians 2:10

⁷ Ephesians 1:12

⁸ Mark 10:10b - "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

do God's blessings for us to do with all the powers in the world? The sole interest of the world is to maintain worldly power by eliminating any obstacles, even the blessings of God. It is when this election statement helps us. For the creator and redeemer God, dying in Christ is as much important as living in Christ as if a seed needs to die first to bear much fruits. In the case of the death of John the Baptist, humanly speaking, it was a horrible death in which we don't seem to find any blessings of God. Yet, whether we are aware of it or not, we die every day in different ways. For example, in order to embrace others who are so different from us, our selfish self needs to die, to name a few. It doesn't apply to believers only. Our living in God's blessings is also for those who haven't met it yet. No obstacles can possibly prevent the blessings of God from flowing through us to the world.

God's blessings continually flow through us

In our story time, we heard a story – “Petunia, I love you!” Although it was delivered in a summary form, we can see what kinds of conflicts there are between Petunia – the plump goose and Racoon, who wishes to have Petunia for his dinner. Petunia is such a wise and innocent creature who would accept the other's invitation to walk with him despite his ill intention. On the other hand, Racoon is just faithful to his instinct to carry out his scheme. The plans devised by Racoon have failed one by one only to make himself become the victim of his own plans. The question was, ‘what did Petunia do during the whole time with Racoon?’ We can answer it quite easily. Petunia – the goose is there with Racoon all this time. She doesn't leave him. She is neither afraid of his evil thoughts nor concerned by the uncertain outcome either. Her companionship continues until the end as she saves him from the trap and lets him free. Here the grace of God is represented by Petunia's calm demeanour, who is willing to walk the extra mile for Racoon.

It is precisely the message from the readings from Ephesians and Mark. The life in Christ as blessings of God is no longer ‘my’ or ‘your’ individual life, but as the collective life in Christ that becomes the blessings of God for the world. Knowing it as it is allows us to live as the blessings of God in the community. It is through our genuine service for the community through healings, comfort, walking the extra mile, and more importantly loving them by being there till the end.

The chief task for the church is to proclaim the whole Christian life experience in the light of God's overall plan and the wondrous status that God has bestowed on us. And in an age of bitterness and divisive self-assertion, God's blessings by grace will help achieve the Christian

unity. And it will flow to the community and beyond. May God help us live as the blessings of God today and always. Amen.