**God who surpasses our imaginings Ephesians 3:14-21. July 25 2021**

During this Pandemic the whole population has seen on vivid display how our politicians are buffeted from every side, the interests of every group in society has been putting pressure upon them to make decisions which favour them. On a much different scale it reminds us that all of us have various voices clamouring for our attention. You may have seen the recent Nike advertisement with a woman collecting people hanging off her talking to her clamouring for her attention. In the midst of all the voices how do we hear the voice of God?

How do we recall what God is really like? How can we find our way? How can we stay the course? How can we thrive? How do we envisage God in a world overwhelmed by a pandemic?

The letter to the Ephesians was written to a church or churches facing widespread persecution. Imprisonment and martyrdom was becoming a reality to these early followers of the risen Jesus. The Jewish temple had been destroyed and no Christian “church buildings” existed. The concept of the glory of God being amongst them required creative use of their faith and imagination.

Sometimes we under-rate the power of Christian symbols and places of worship to inspire and encourage us, but in times like this, times of lockdown or restriction we gain a greater appreciation of the beauty and symbolism which inspires us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer whilst in prison wanted to encourage a friend, so he wrote suggesting that the friend take in a variety of worship services over the Easter season, featuring beautiful music and symbolism which could raise his spirits.[[1]](#footnote-1) “The letter shows what a powerful support such memories of a large church at prayer can be in the life of faith.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Massive worship services give a great sense of the glory of God in worship.It would have “required extraordinary inner confidence to remain a faithful Christian with no external signs of the truth of the faith.”[[3]](#footnote-3) It required the strengthening that God alone can give.

Into this context, and with this burden as a motivator, Paul writes to this community. He offers words of encouragement and he frequently turns to prayer. Whilst he remains imprisoned this is really all he can do for them. There is a strong passion in his prayer. It is his only prayer which makes reference to kneeling. Normally people stood to pray. They would kneel, when they had an urgent passionate desire to pleading with God. Paul’s life seemed to revolve around prayer, it certainly comes very naturally into his letters. Perhaps this gives us a key to the power that appears to have flowed through his preaching, pastoral work and letters.

**Strengthened with the fullness of God – the very life of God within**

Paul prays that they will be strengthened within, strengthened in their inner beings, *“filled with all the fullness of God”.* The New Testament consistently teaches “that we are not able to serve God acceptably in our own strength. All too easily we give way to stronger forces or simply succumb to what we see as desirable... To walk in the ways of God we need a strength greater than our own, and Paul prays that his converts may know this strength.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The same power of God which raised Jesus from death, Paul points out is also the power which God exercises within us.

He knows that this strength, God’s strength will be characterised by love, a love that is rooted in their lives, nourishing and sustaining their inner lives, like the roots of a plant. The source of this strength is the indwelling presence of Christ at the centre of their beings exercising His influence over all they are and do.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Strengthened in company with others**

Paul recognises that the strength they needed would come to them as the community of Christ. *“[H]e is saying that it is only in company with other believers that [they] can enter into the fullness of what the Christian way means. We know something of love in what God has done for us personally, but we know the fullness of love only when we see what God has done in “all the saints.””[[6]](#footnote-6)* Paul uses the image of them being grounded in love, a metaphor which would remind them of a foundation stone in a building. This love is the foundation for Christians, it builds our lives together as a dwelling place for God. They are strengthened as the community of God through the exercise of love to one another.

**Strengthened with a constantly expanding vision of God**

Paul affirms that the strength they require is not merely available to them from God, but constantly surpassed by God’s limitless power. God *“is able to do exceeding, abundantly above all they ask or think”.[[7]](#footnote-7)* God breaks out of the boxes which our minds place God in.

Stephen Altrogge seems to express this well he says, *“﻿God is not like us. [God’s] ﻿ways are not our ways and [God’s] thoughts are not our thoughts. ﻿[God] cannot be neatly summarized or contained. [God] cannot be ﻿reduced to formulas or theories. Our ﻿highest, deepest, loftiest thoughts of God only scratch the ﻿surface of [God’s] overwhelming glory. If you think you've got ﻿God figured out, you're worshiping the wrong God. He ﻿makes geniuses look like fools and the most brilliant ﻿philosophers sound like blathering buffoons. [God]* knows all ﻿that has been and all that will be, and absolutely nothing can ﻿stop [God] from accomplishing [God’s] breath-taking purposes.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

“Our praying is apt to be limited by what we think is possible. Even though we do not consciously set a limit to what we ask from God. ..We have no conception of what almighty power can do.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Paul states that it exceeds our knowledge, understanding, thoughts and imaginings.

Paul’s prayer paints a picture of vast proportions, using powerful adjectives, which point to the totality of God’s love and power being lavished upon the Ephesians, that it may work within and through them. It also highlights the limitations of human comprehension in seeking to know Christ’s love *“which surpasses knowledge”* and experiencing God’s power which surpasses human thoughts and imaginings.

The limitless power of God is also unlimited by time and circumstance. The prophet Isaiah reminds God’s people of this. He says *“Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn grey I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike? Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention,”[[10]](#footnote-10)*

So in our current circumstances, it may be helpful to take time to open ourselves to the love and power of God, that we may be filled with the fulness of God, that God may permeate from the centre of our lives and flow through us in love towards others. It may be a good time to reaffirm the reality that we experience the strength of God through sharing in the community of the church, through recognising God at work in others. It may be helpful to remind ourselves of the greatness of the God we worship and serve, and that God’s power and love will always surpass our understanding, and that this mighty God is active in our world.

Stephen Altrogge again sums it up well*, “When all our best laid plans are washed away like a sandcastle in the tide…..We need a God who is not like us. … ﻿We need a colossal, sovereign ruling, reigning, good, tender, and merciful God. We need a God ﻿who doesn’t operate according to our standards. We need a ﻿God who knows what he is doing!”[[11]](#footnote-11)*

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* (London: SCM Press, 1954) 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pheme Perkins, “The Letter to the Ephesians: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections, in Leander E. Keck et al (Eds) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 417 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Perkins, “The Letter to the Ephesians, 417 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians,*(Grand Rapids: baker publishing, 1994) 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Morris, *Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians,*103-104 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Morris, *Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians,* 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eph 3:20b NKJV [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stephen Altrogge, *Untamable God: Encountering the One who is Bigger, Better and more Dangerous than you could Possibly Imagine,*(USA: IGCtesting.com, 2013) 21-22 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Morris, *Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians,* 108 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Isaiah 46:3-5, 8-10 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stephen Altrogge, *Untamable God,* 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)