

Finding Spiritual Blessings

Readings: Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

“Do you want the good news first, or the bad news?”

I wonder how often you have been asked that! I usually ask for the good news first and that's exactly what we have in our first reading from Ephesians. The good news is that we are all blessed in so many ways.

Material and relational blessings

“The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us.” We have so many material blessings to be thankful for. Over the last two weeks we have had brilliant sunshine, but we will also be grateful when we get some rain. Similarly we give thanks for food and drink, shelter and comfort. *“Every good and perfect gift is coming down from above, from the Father...”* (James 1) More significant are the relational blessings that we enjoy. Family, friends, neighbours. Even our pets bring so much pleasure to our lives. But in our reading from Ephesians, Paul is not thinking of either of these sorts of blessings.

Spiritual blessings

“The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us... with every spiritual blessing.” Spiritual blessings are the most important of all because they help us to appreciate all other blessings and they last for ever. Paul goes on to name some of these blessings: the Father has adopted us into his family (v5) He has purchased our freedom (v7) He has forgiven all our wrongdoing (v7) He has given us an inheritance (v11) and a hope for the future.

This is my story

At the age of 13 I came to know these spiritual blessings for myself. I already enjoyed good material blessings together with a loving family and friends. However my life was in a complete muddle. Rather like the prodigal son I had no thought of my Heavenly Father and was as far removed from spiritual things as you could imagine. One day all my fears and guilt overwhelmed me and coming home

from school I put myself to bed hoping to escape in sleep. But I was too upset to sleep and lay sobbing with self pity in the bed.

After a time, I came to my senses (like the prodigal son) and remembered things I had heard about a Heavenly Father. I got out of bed and kneeling down asked forgiveness for all the mess I was in, gave my life to Him and asked Him to take control. When I woke up the following morning I felt as if I was walking on air. I had entered a new dimension of peace and happiness, the realm of spiritual blessings. Now when I read Ephesians I think "This is my story." I have been adopted into God's family, I have been forgiven, I have a future and a hope. All of us who are Christians can read this chapter and say "This is my story. Paul is describing me."

The two most important words

How is it that we are able to experience these spiritual blessings? We come here to the two most important words in this chapter and indeed in the whole New Testament: IN CHRIST. "*The Father has blessed us... with every spiritual blessing... in Christ.*" These two words are the most frequent description in the Bible of a follower of Jesus. They occur over 160 times in the writings of Paul and several times in this chapter of Ephesians.

What does it mean to be in Christ?

Every year Iris gives out collection boxes for the Children's Society. We take them home and collect coins during the year. The coins are "in the box" but at the end of the year Iris takes all the money out of the boxes and sends it away to the Children's Society. This is not like being in Christ. Being "in Christ" is not a temporary thing that lasts a short time but permanent, lasting for eternity.

How do I know this? Jesus said "I am the vine and you are the branches." The branches are organically joined to the vine. Paul said that the Christian is like a hand or an arm permanently joined to the body. Once we are "in Christ" we are in Christ for ever, throughout this life and into the next. As a new Christian at the age of 13 my favourite song had this chorus:

*Now I belong to Jesus.
Jesus belongs to me.
Not for the years of time alone
But for eternity.*

We have looked at the good news; what about the bad news?

In our second reading, Herod was an evil but also tragic character. Did you notice that *“he liked to listen to John.”* What a tragedy that although he liked to listen he never took the leap of faith to become a follower of Jesus. Another person who “liked to listen” was the rich young ruler who when challenged to action walked away. King Agrippa “liked to listen” to Paul. He said to Paul *“You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”* But in the end they all missed out on the spiritual blessings of being “in Christ”, of being joined to Jesus.

Does this describe you at this moment? Well this morning the bad news can easily be changed to good news. By giving your life to God today you can be adopted into his family and receive all the spiritual blessings of being “in Christ.”

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