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March 19th: Ephesians 1:15-23 & Matthew 1:18-25

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Christ over all powers, the head of the Church. Joseph, the father of Jesus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Ephesians 1, verses 15-23. 1. What is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come? And he put all things under his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. After the initial address, Paul's epistles commonly begin with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Ephesians, however, has an extended blessing of God in chapter 1, verses 3-14. The prayer of thanksgiving follows this in verses 15-23. In the initial blessing, Paul declared the centrality of Christ in the entire work of God in the cosmos, in history, and in salvation.

Now he expresses his thanks to God for the faith of the recipients of the letter, and his prayer for their growth in understanding of the truth of Christ. If this is an encyclical, Paul is probably writing both to churches that he has visited, or planted, alongside churches like the church in Colossae, of which he has only heard through men like Epaphras. However, whether he knew the believers in the churches personally or not, the news of the faith of the Christians in the region had reached him in prison.

Both their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love towards the saints have been reported to him, and along with the incredible work of God in Christ that he has explored in the opening blessing, this provokes him to thanksgiving and prayer for them. The expression faith in the Lord Jesus could be read either as faith with the Lord Jesus as its object, or as a reference to faith exercised in the realm of the Lord Jesus. I believe that it is more likely to be the latter, in large measure on account of Paul's more regular usage.

If we are to trust God and be faithful in difficult days, we must do so on the solid rock of Christ. Our faith does not just look to Christ, it is built upon Christ. Their love for all of the saints has also reached Paul's ears.

Love, as seen elsewhere in Paul, is paramount, it is the virtue that holds everything else together. The love toward all the saints, more particularly, is the glue that will hold the people of God in unity. Paul's prayer is, like so much of his teaching, deeply shaped by a Trinitarian grammar.

The underlying structure of salvation, and of God's work more generally, is from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, to be saved is to be brought into fellowship with the Triune God. Whether there is a direct reference to the Holy Spirit in verse 17 can be debated. It is possible that we should read this as a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, referring to the human spirit that is illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

However, we might think of the description of the Messiah in Isaiah chapter 11 verse 2. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. The spirit of the Lord rests upon Christ, and those in Christ receive the spirit of Christ. The wisdom that we have is focused on the understanding that we receive of the work of God in Christ.

It grants us a knowledge of the hope to which we have been called, and of his glorious inheritance. When Paul talks about the spirit, he so frequently talks about the spirit in relation to God's promised future. The spirit is the down payment of God's future, he is the guarantee of our inheritance.

The spirit is the spirit of adoption, anticipating the adoption that we await in the resurrection. The spirit is the one who opens our eyes to the hope to which God has called us. The spirit is the one who seals us for future redemption.

In the work of the spirit in our midst, we have a reality-filled promise of God's future. The spirit will draw us to reflect upon and to long for God's future. The spirit is the one by whom we groan inwardly with birth pangs of the new creation.

The spirit is the one who summons people into the future that God has prepared for them. If we have the spirit within us, we will be yearning, we will be moving towards God's future. The spirit of wisdom that God gives us helps us to recognise the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward us.

It helps us to recognise that we have been caught up in the purpose of our creator, determined in Christ before the foundation of the world. The almighty God's plan from before all of the ages is playing out right now in our midst, bringing us salvation and new life. We aren't in some neglected backwater of the cosmos with a God who is unmindful or forgetful of us.

We have, by a remarkable work of his grace, been made partakers of the central purpose of everything, Jesus Christ. God's power was most clearly manifest in the resurrection and the ascension, by which Christ was raised from the dead and placed above all other powers. The point here is not just one about their power.

One could argue that God's might is more clearly seen in the act of creation. What in particular do we see in Christ? We see the character of God's might and we see the purpose of God's might. Many people worry about the hiddenness of God, especially when we talk about things such as election, as Paul does in this chapter.

We can wonder whether God's will is really a threatening reality, relative to which we can never know where we stand. God is veiled and capricious and we don't know what his purpose for us is. However, God's true face is seen in the Lord Jesus.

Much as a child can trust her parents with many things that she does not yet understand, because she knows their loving intentions and their good character, so in Christ the shape of God's great purpose and his face towards us are unveiled. Do you want to know what God's purpose is for humanity? Look at Christ. Christ has been raised from the dead and seated above all earthly powers in the heavenly places.

This is what God intends for us as his people. And in Christ, we also see his power to carry this out. The power of death could not contain Christ.

No rule, authority, power or dominion stands over him. Whatever type of thing to which you could attribute might or rule, whatever category you could employ, Christ is supreme over them all. He is above every name that is named.

Names have power, but Christ's name is the greatest name of all. Philippians chapter 2 verses 9 to 11. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven

and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Nor is there any temporal limit. Christ's supremacy is not just in this age. It is also in the age that is to come.

All things are placed under his feet. Paul is alluding to Psalm 110 verse 1 here, the great ascension verse, quoted more than any other verse in the New Testament. The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

But the clincher here, the chief point, is that the one who has all of this authority, power and dominion has been given as head over all things to the church. Paul's point here is not so much that Christ is also the ruler over all things within the church, much as he is over every other thing in the creation. Rather, it is that as the ruler over all things, Christ is given as head to the church.

As head of the church, Christ is acting in a way that renders the church the special beneficiary of all of his work, of all of his authority, of all of his power and dominion and might. That is exercised in a way that blesses and builds up his church. Paul's point is that Christ is the Lord of all and the church is his body.

He rules all of these things in a way that leads to our good. Indeed, as Christ's body, the church is the realm where the fullness of Christ is to be found. The church is the realm where the life of Christ is most fully being realised and expressed by the work of his spirit.

Christ operates over all things in the world, but he is present in a unique way within his church. A question to consider. The meaning of the term head is often debated as Paul speaks about the husband as the head of the wife.

How might consideration of how Paul speaks of Christ as the head of the church help us better to understand what this could mean? Matthew chapter 1 verses 18 to 25. Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. Matthew chapter 1 proceeds to recount the birth of Christ. Whereas in the Gospel of Luke the narrative focuses upon the character of Mary and the story of the nativity around her perspective, in Matthew it is Joseph who is front and centre.

And Joseph faces a problem. He is betrothed to a woman who is found to be with child before they come together. Joseph is a righteous man and his intention seems to be to quietly divorce Mary so that she will not be openly shamed.

There is an element of mercy here seen as part of his righteousness, that the righteousness exemplified by him is not going to the full measure of what was allowed to him by the law. He could have put her to an open shame, but he did not want to. But yet, while he is considering these things, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and assures him that the child is not a result of unfaithfulness, but that he should marry Mary, the child that has been conceived being from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear the son, but he will name the son. The son will be identified as his son. The son will have the status given by his genealogy.

The son is being given not just to Mary alone, but to the couple. And in the Gospel of Matthew, the prominence of Joseph as a character emphasises this fact, that the child belongs to Joseph and the child is a child that he has the privilege of raising as his own son. The fact that the child is conceived and born prior to any sexual union between Mary and Joseph is important.

The child does not come from them. The child comes from God. It's conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit within Mary.

This child to be born is a sort of new creation, a child born apart from human relations, a child that is given to humanity in the fullness of time, the one who fits into this genealogy that we've read in the beginning of this chapter, but one who comes apart from the genealogical processes of procreation. He takes up this legacy of a messy genealogy and all the baggage that comes with it, and he comes into it to bring salvation from the sins that this genealogy might bring to our mind. Joseph is addressed not just as someone who must passively assent to what is happening.

He should take action. He should take Mary as his wife. And he should later name the child Jesus.

He's given that responsibility towards the child. And the responsibility that he's given is also to bear a knowledge of the destiny of this child and to ensure that it is realised. In the chapter that follows, we see Joseph playing this part.

He is addressed by angels on a couple of further occasions and is responsible for the safety of this child. God has committed an important task to Joseph's hand, and he is a

faithful and righteous man who will complete it. At this point, Mary would probably have been a young teenager and Joseph just out of his teens.

Their marriage would have been arranged by their parents, but with their consent. Their situation would not have been particularly unusual. There would have been many other couples in a similar sort of situation.

The angel's appearance to Joseph is also important because Joseph now can bear witness to Mary's faithfulness and to the origin of Jesus. Both of them have independently received messages from God concerning the identity of the son that Mary is bearing. It doesn't rest upon Mary's word alone or upon Joseph's word alone.

Both of them have this truth and they will bear it together as they hold together in raising this son as faithful parents and as a faithful couple. The child is to be given the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. The name means Yahweh saves.

It connects with the name of Joshua in the Old Testament. And the connection between Jesus and Joshua is one worth reflecting upon. Joshua takes over from Moses on the banks of the Jordan and leads the people into the Promised Land.

Jesus is the one who takes over from John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan and will lead his people into salvation. You can also think about the relationship between Elijah and Elisha. Elisha, God saves, God is salvation, is another name that seems very close to the meaning of Jesus in its significance.

And as in the case of Jesus from John the Baptist and Joshua from Moses, Elisha takes over the ministry of Elisha having crossed over to the far side of the Jordan. These characters then I think have very similar patterns to their lives. Jesus is the one who will save his people from their sins.

Jesus comes from heaven but he does not just come down out of the blue into the middle of history as one who's an alien to it. Rather he's the one who takes up a history himself. He takes up a people and he identifies with those people.

He comes as the heir of a great legacy of failure and sin and covenant breaking and he holds that history as his own and will bring salvation into that situation. All of this we're told is in fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 7 verse 14 of the book of Isaiah, he speaks of a young woman who will conceive and bear a son and whose name will be Emmanuel.

Now many have debated about the meaning of this text. Within the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it invited the reading as a virgin. Whereas in the Hebrew it could just be a young woman more generally.

Such a young woman might commonly be presumed to be a virgin but that would not necessarily be the case. So to see this verse as an Old Testament prediction of the virgin birth is maybe to stretch the meaning of that original text which presents a problem for us. What is Matthew doing with this text? He presents it as being fulfilled in Christ and references the virgin conceiving which is an over-reading of the text as we find it within the context of Isaiah.

What's he doing? Well it seems to me that Matthew uses the Old Testament not just in a way that has a this means that relationship where there's an Old Testament prophecy, a New Testament fulfillment. Rather there's more logic of fulfillment as a filling out, a bringing of the text to a greater and higher expression of its meaning. So whereas in the original context it may have been referring to Ahaz's son Hezekiah as the fulfillment of that prophecy initially, there is a fuller fulfillment which we see in Christ in which case the meaning of the Septuagint becomes more foregrounded.

This is a virgin that's going to give birth and it's a fuller realization of the meaning of the original text. Now when the New Testament authors use the Old Testament they want us to go back to the Old Testament and pay attention to the context. In that original context a reluctant Ahaz who's not really going to listen much to the advice of the prophet does not really want to sign but God gives him a sign anyway.

This child will be born and before the child comes of age there will be this deliverance that God will come and be present to his people but there will also be judgment. In that historical situation the child is a sign of God's presence. God's presence in blessing and in judgment.

It's a harbinger of what's going to happen in the future. Christ's birth then is a similar sort of thing. God is coming, being present to his people and things are going to change.

The miraculous birth of this child is a sign that God is with his people and that things are going to change. There's going to be blessing and there's going to be judgment. God is about to come near to his people in this child and as in the days of Ahaz people need to brace themselves.

A question to consider. Why do you think that God told Joseph after Mary had been found to be with child that the child was from the Holy Spirit rather than beforehand when Mary was told?