

Cosmic Christ

Ephesians 1:3-14

The book of Ephesians is not one that I studied at University past the cursory walk through the contexts that happen in first year, so because it is in the lectionary over the next few weeks, I thought I should do some background reading on it – which I found really interesting. And at the risk of giving what might sound more like a short lecture than a sermon or reflection, I thought it might be a good idea to share some of that learning to give you some of the frameworks to think about what you are reading or hearing over the next couple of weeks. This also means that as I start writing the reflection, I have no idea what the theme for this service will be, though hopefully that will emerge by the end of it!

Unlike many of the other New Testament books, we have very little knowledge about the context of Ephesians, and I think that's what drew me to exploring it further. Most of the other books have enough clues about who first read it and what their context was that we can reconstruct this. You may recall that I have often shared about the context of what we read, especially in relation to the Gospels. There are some books – as in the undisputed letters of Paul – where we even know who wrote them and can have even more insight about why they were written. On the other hand, Ephesians has none of this.

Our modern Bibles include in 1:2 "To all the saints who are in Ephesus," however the words "in Ephesus" do not appear in the oldest manuscripts that we have, indicating these were added later. Indeed, at least one ancient author argued this was a letter to the church in Laodicea. This means we have no idea to which church this epistle was written and the contents give us no clues either.

The next problem with this book is that while tradition ascribes it to Paul, virtually no serious biblical scholars today think this is accurate and there are a whole range of reasons for this assessment. Let me start by saying that one or two reasons could be explained away as a development of Paul's writing, but certainly not all of them.

The scholars of Greek tell us about a change in language and grammar. There are words and phrases that appear nowhere else in the New Testament, and other words and phrases might appear in the New Testament, but not in any of the writing we know came from Paul. Even in English we can notice the different style of writing, particularly in the opening of the letter. It's not quite as personal as Paul's letters. Even in Romans, where Paul is writing to a group he has not yet met, there are those little personal touches that show something of a connection to the readers. Ephesians has none of this. Even if there had originally been a community named as the addressee, it contains little of the usual warmth that Paul's letters show.

To our modern minds, the affirmation that Paul was not the author can be quite problematic, however, it is important to remember this was not the case to the ancients. Both Greek and Jewish culture accepted writings in the name of a previous person and this is evidenced by texts such as the "Apocalypse of the twelve patriarchs" that is depicted as being the work of the sons of Jacob, but was written around this time. We also have books such as Daniel, which when it was written in the second century BCE, was placed in with the "writings" rather than the prophets and a much later generation forgot about this and moved it to be included among the minor prophets. In short, even when the early church knew this was not by Paul, they saw it as something that he might have written, had he still

been around. It is a very early interpretation of the teaching of Paul for a new time and a new context, much like a sermon or reflection is today.

So, we do not know who wrote this or to whom they wrote, or even why they wrote this letter, but there is still some things that we can know about Ephesians. One thing we know is the church at the time was struggling with a division between Jews and Gentiles – were they equal or would the Jews end up on a higher level of heaven than the Gentiles? We also know it was written in a time when the theme of heavenly ascent was reasonably common among different religions. We also know this letter is written in the standard letter format of the day and uses quite common rhetorical devices.

Another point, that is worth exploring, is the concept of “mystery.” What we call “sacraments” are still in the Orthodox tradition called “mysteries.” Our cultural baggage about this word can make it hard to grasp what is being communicated, but essentially in this context a “mystery” is something that we cannot understand on our own; we need help and support to grasp the idea.

Today's reading is part of the opening thanksgiving, where the main themes that will arise in the letter are summarised in one beautiful burst of thankfulness. There is more to the story than simply redemption being won at Calvary.

Ephesians looks at a “big picture” story and sees it as being laid out from the start of creation to include everyone – both Jews and Gentiles. The Greek cosmos, with all its various layers, were seen s being put in place by the same God who walked this earth in the form of Jesus the Christ and in this we can have hope. This does not mean we need to limit ourselves to the biblical understanding of the universe, or the Greek understanding represented here, but looking at our modern understanding gives us a greater “wow” factor to sit alongside this grand, cosmic thanksgiving constructed by the author to invite the recipients of this letter to reflect on what is said.

As you read or listen to this letter over the next few weeks, I invite you to reflect on how this early author reinterprets the writings of Paul for his time and what this tells us about reinterpreting the writings for our own time: Who are the people who first invited us to set our hope in Christ? Who have we invited to engage in that same hope? And importantly, how has society changed since we first came to hope in Christ and what does this mean for how we communicate that same hope to new generations?