



Sermon preached by Revd Tim Meadows on 19th January 2025

Readings: *John 20: 1-10; Ephesians 4: 1-16*

Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Ephesians and Philippians were couched in reflection from a bleak prison cell, praying, imagining and lucidly responding to what he knew of these churches. Throughout history we have benefitted from letters from prison. Be it Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Hitler's Germany, or Martin Luther King whose birthday is celebrated tomorrow as Trump is inaugurated president. (This double celebration also occurred when Ronald Reagan was inaugurated.) I quote from MLK's letter from a Birmingham Jail 1963, "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."¹ If that is not yet another prescient commentary on the 2024 American presidential election, I do not know what is. It is a call to dig deeper.

The moral tone of Ephesians in the first few verses mirrors a similar tone of modern letters from prison. Often there is confession, a concern that the movement can flourish, that the best of our community can win out, and remember who or whose you are and be faithful. Paul's faithfulness to Christ in God and the communities of fellow disciples gave him resilience. Within the prison, resilience came by knowing the body of Christ was there too and also in the wider world of his mission. Just as Paul is remembering his calling, today we are asked to remember our calling, to live in such a way that reflects our calling and then root ourselves in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Ephesians received Paul's letter as a challenge and affirmation. I wonder if this is a challenge and affirmation for us?

It reminds me of a personal story where I was called to serve early on in my ministry. I was finishing up my undergraduate degree and had completed my candidacy process for ministry in Kansas. I was young, head of hair, idealistic, and full of a messiah complex. The regional superintendent phoned, asked me if I could go serve a small rural church in Youngtown, Kansas because the minister in place had signed off due to illness. I would need to be there for eight months. The first week, I drove out there in the dead of winter. It was about 40 miles away. The little white steepled church stood in the middle of a massive wheat field which dwarfed one's perspective of how large the building was. This community was perfect for raising up a young, inexperienced and idealistic minister. I will never forget their nurturing of my sense of call. As Paul writes, they were patient, humble and gentle and they bore with each other out of love.

The choir was a male choir and they all wore the same toupee from Sears and Roebuck, which is a large catalogue business which catered to rural America long before Amazon showed up. They sang with gusto and were clearly moved by what they sang. I am not sure that was true of everyone in the pews. They humoured me with my not so good sermons, like all of you are this morning. Nearly everyone was involved or related to agriculture. The congregation was well organised, worship was impassioned and the elders were holy people.

After a few months, I noticed there were new families moving in down the road. I made a point to go visit them and welcome them to Youngtown. One woman had left her husband due to drunkenness. The other was a Hispanic family who were renting from one of the Youngtown church members. At the Elders Meeting, I brought up the new folks who were in the community for prayer and hospitality to be extended to them. I soon learned there was a local church policy at Youngtown. You would be allowed to buy land and house from various church members, who were all landlords in the area, as long as you agreed to join Youngtown Church. All of a sudden, the unity of Youngtown came clearly into view as on the next Sunday, the male choir

¹ Martin Luther King, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963.

belted out, “Nearer My God to Thee.” I found out they were afraid of people who were not like them, white, protestant and middle class. Moreover, they did not want to be neighbours with Roman Catholics or foreigners. Conscientiously tasked with patience (heavy sighs), gentleness (I hate confrontation), and honesty (warmly cushioned), undoing the evangelistic trickery of power and privilege at Youngtown caused me to see through their perfect illusion of unity and faithful practice. Suddenly, my innocence was dashed as there were serpents in the church! Mind you, I have to confess, I have thought of making all our renters of the buildings in Liverpool at least attend worship once a month and they can get a reduction in rent! It worked for Youngtown, why not here? As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:13 “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” I am not sure Jesus would approve. Another one of Paul’s prison letters comes to mind: Love does not insist on its own way... Love trusts” 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7.

The Church of Ephesus lasted some 600 years. I know it is a popular sermon reference to refer to the seven churches Jesus spoke to in the book of Revelation 1 as all being dead now. Somehow, to offer a word of hope for us too, that God’s realm will prevail with the present or without this present circumstance. In other words, local churches have a time, then God is up to something new. Ephesus is one of those seven churches extinct and the ruins can still be seen in Izmir, Turkey. I would encourage you to think about, we are these churches, inheritors of their faith, albeit not in the same cultures. We are the church now. Tradition tells us that Ephesus became home to the beloved disciple, John, and Mary, Jesus’s mother. With the upheaval of Jerusalem, opportunities arose to scatter with the diaspora of Jewish and Christian communities around 70 A.D. when the temple fell. It was near or during this period that Paul’s letter was written.

The Ephesians seemed to be doing all the right things. Yes, there were demons to contend with, what’s new? A growing multi-ethnic community which was gentile and Jewish, as Ephesus was a seaport town. All the wonders, distractions and seductions of Ephesus provided weedy and fertile soil for the church. There was a dominant culture centred around the worship of the Greek god Artemis which was a challenge for early Christians to be faithful and not dilute the truth of Jesus Christ even more. Paul put a great deal of effort into Ephesus, which is why he spent time and equipped this church to be the strongest in his network. By the way, Timothy, Paul’s young assistant, was placed as the minister at Ephesus. Which might explain why Paul reminded the community to remain faithful to their calling to be Jesus’s followers despite competing philosophies and heresies. I Tim. 1:3

Now that you know about Ephesus church, you might be wondering, whether or not, the paschal gospel reading today fits into this story, of a strong and challenged Christ community? Can we see the United Reformed Church in this example of a long lived church which refused to believe that death had the last word? A church that learns “getting it right” is not as important as being faithful, maturing together in knowledge and faith, building itself up in love. The lesson of Youngtown is that churches and ministries can be imperfect. Through imperfections, opportunities arise for justice and joy to break in and remind us of God's truth and grace.

At the moment, the General Assembly and Synods are suspended in a season of listening, reflecting, imagining and preparation. As many of you may have read, the Church Life Review is moving us toward a position of releasing resources and supporting our ministries creatively and practically. There is an air of anticipation to simplify, take risks and find our joy again. Discovering the importance of consciously making contact with others and having the courage to share our faith. Is it a stance toward trying to survive institutionally? Or are we open to being transformed further and maturing in the Spirit of Christ? I would say it is the latter. Our church is ready to nervously move outside of our traditional concepts of ministry to realise new expressions of faith. It's critical that we keep Jesus Christ at the centre. Discerning truth and

grace in our own church life. Equipping saints and various callings to risk ourselves despite a climate of fear and what ifs.

The language of resurrection is appearing in our language. Throughout Paul's prison letters he points us to know the power of Jesus' resurrection. That God's power is the same that raised Jesus from the dead. Our call is not to believe in a future without resurrection. The whole of the gospel embodies the resurrection. When I mention the resurrection, that doesn't mean there will not be a cross. The cross and resurrection are held together as a complete action – not separate from one another. When the beloved disciple, John, and Peter raced to the tomb to see if Jesus had risen as Mary Magdalene had told them, they looked in first, knowing full well the death and betrayal Jesus suffered, they also had to wonder if resurrection was indeed the promised outcome. Their faithfulness, despite imperfections, propelled them to meet Jesus again who is the whole reason we are church – and not merely a country club or community centre. Here and now we are called to be faithful. We already know the future – we shall live in and through Jesus's death and resurrection where hope and joy live.

I will close with another Prison Letter:

Being able to face dying doesn't yet mean we can face death. It's possible for a human being to manage dying, but overcoming death means resurrection. It is not through the art of dying but through Christ's resurrection that a new and cleansing wind can blow through our present world. This is the answer to the "Give me a place to stand and I will move the Earth." If a few people really believe this and were guided by it in their earthly actions, a great deal would change. To live in the light of the resurrection – that is what Easter means.²

*I would paraphrase saying it is my hope **we live in the light of the resurrection – be faithful, be Easter people and grow in love for God and one another.***

Tim Meadows
19th January 2025

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 1943.