

## **Introduction**

- Once heard Rico Tice use this illustration to introduce a sermon on this passage:
  - he said he'd only ever watched one horror film - Silence of the Lambs - doesn't recommend it
  - final scene is imprinted on his mind: Jodie Foster is a police woman investigating a serial killer called Buffalo Bill
  - called that because he skins his victims
  - eventually Jodie - small, petite - goes down into basement of his house - finds Buffalo Bill along with one of the women he has captured/victim, down in a pit
  - a fight ensues....
  - suddenly Buffalo Bill hits power switch and puts all lights out
  - Jodie Foster is completely disabled, can't see, doesn't know her way round
  - she crouches down, trying to feel what is in front of her
  - making it all the more terrifying as you watch is that Buffalo Bill puts on night vision goggles - he can see her, he approaches her, watching her horror
  - Jodie Foster is completely vulnerable, in the dark against a powerful evil enemy that she cannot see
- Now Paul at the end of Ephesians, in chapter 6, tells us that the Christian is also fighting an enormously powerful, invisible, evil enemy:
  - (Rico Tice when I heard him use this illustration wouldn't say what happened at the end of the film - didn't want to encourage people to go and see it!!)
  - 6:10ff - a fight to the death with spiritual forces of evil
  - that is our general context - we are naive if we can't see the terrible evil there is in the world
  - its source is not just in the human heart
  - source of this evil is also spiritual forces, at work to destroy
- Flipping back to today's passage: **chapter 3:1-13**
- At start and end it does not look as though Paul is winning!
  - v.1, he a prisoner;
  - v.13, he is suffering
- His situation looks pathetic! Rather like the church today in some ways....
  - we can be derided and look pathetic
  - for the young Ephesian Christians, how would it have looked?
  - to see their spiritual father in prison, slandered, discredited?
  - they may well have been thinking "is Paul right? Have I made the right decision in thinking that what Paul taught is right? Look where its got him..."
  - and the spiritual forces would have been at work seeking to discourage these young believers - just as they are at work seeking to discourage each one of us
  - working to make them doubt their faith, to separate them from Christ, and to separate them from their fellow believers, those they love in the Lord/in the church
- So Paul writes 3:13 - don't be discouraged, stand firm, be confident
  - discouraged here means "lose heart" - aren't we sometimes tempted to do that?
  - literally the word means "burn out"
  - so, don't drain away and lose all perspective

### **Why not?**

- Why be confident Paul? Ephesus is against us, you are in prison...
  - in Acts 19:24 Demetrius the silversmith organised a riot against them
  - there is a constant threat of violence, and of economic hardship
  - they might say to Paul "I leave my house to come to church and I see the huge temple of Artemis, and that discourages me. I see the wealth of the silversmith, and that discourages me, and I look at their faces and know that some of them would like to attack me, and that drains me! So why should I be confident?"
- And all the time the spiritual forces are coming in behind these outward manifestations of opposition to knock them

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- so Paul responds: stand firm, and do so
  - because you understand the mystery - 2-6
  - and because you understand the church - 7-13
- Those are our two headings for this evening.

### **Stand Firm: Because you understand the Mystery (vs.2-6)**

- Paul says you can be confident because God has made a mystery known to you through me
- Its an irritating feeling to be excluded, to feel yourself left out of those who know what is going on
  - even just news of who is ill...
  - if we get a letter and it says "confidential" on it, or someone tells us something "in strictest confidence" there can be a bit of a buzz within us - feeling we are party to something of significance
  - so Paul says, "Listen, you battered Ephesians: let me strengthen you by letting you in on a secret: I'm not excluding you - indeed," says Paul, "my whole life is about telling you this. Let me put you in possession of the facts..."
  - *"surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you."* (v.2)
  - as he says that, suddenly he's not so much in prison, the amazing miracle of his life story begins to come through to us...
  - the miracle of the transformation of Paul's own life
  - you may want to flick back to Paul's own account of this miracle that changed Paul from persecutor to proclaimer: Acts 26:14-19
- Can't say God has no power!!
  - Paul was appointed then to be a witness, a sent one, to turn people from darkness to light, etc....
  - that's why Paul isn't glum even as he languishes in prison
  - he knows that miracle that has been done!
- A bishop: speaking to a group of newly ordained clergy in Pittsburg in the USA said:
  - *"If other people knew you like God knows you, all your faults, all your vain thoughts, all your sins, and all the things in your heart, all the wrong thoughts you've ever had, would they trust you with the kind of work God has? Here is the supreme confidence God has in his own grace - he'll take the like of you and me and Paul and give us the privilege of being his saints."*
- Paul never stopped marvelling at that!
  - and then, having rescued him God gave Paul a task - something to pass on that he had received
  - and what did he reveal be passed on? **The mystery of Christ!!**
- So **"in reading this"** (v.4) you'll be able to understand the mystery of Christ
  - now when we hear the word mystery we tend to think of circumstances so baffling that they defy explanation
  - we immediately think we need a detective to unravel the mystery, start looking for clues...
  - but that isn't how Paul is using the word
  - **a mystery is a truth that would be unknown unless God revealed it**
  - Paul is talking, then, about something that people don't understand - not because it is too hard, but because simply because they haven't yet been told - see v.5
- So what is this mystery? One that will so encourage and strengthen these Ephesians?
  - *that the salvation promised to the Jews is not just for the Jews, but equally for the Gentiles*
  - said over and over in v.6 through the repetition of the phrase "together"
  - so, through the death of Christ, not only has the alienation been overcome between myself and God (2:1-10).... but also, more, God has linked me up not just with himself, but also with other people - we are linked up with other

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- Christians, with the church
  - wonderful!!
  - Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream" speech dreamt of a new society in America, one not based on colour
  - here is God's new society, created with the power to live out Martin Luther King's dream
  - suddenly you can have a community where there is that level of togetherness!
  - how does it happen? 2:13 - through the blood of Christ, 2:14 made the two one
- Think what this would have meant in Ephesus!
  - a Jewish and a Gentile family living opposite each other would never have spoken....
  - suddenly they find themselves in church, sitting next to each other, the dividing wall has come down - they share the same cup, the same bread - the children play together...
  - wonderful!
- OK, but if it is so wonderful that the two are now able to be one... what are you doing in prison?
  - I find it discouraging that you are locked up...
  - Paul says understand the context of my imprisonment - why I am locked up - and you won't be discouraged
  - remember? Acts 21:29 - riot in Jerusalem, why he is in prison - accused of taking a Gentile man (Trochimus the Ephesian) into the heart of the Jewish Temple
  - uproar that ensued was precisely because of the gulf between Jew and Gentile
  - Jews fearful that Paul, who preached equality of access to God for Jew and Gentile, would act that out and take a Gentile into the heart of the Temple complex in Jerusalem, the inner, Jews only court
  - but the miracle is really that Paul's message is that the all who believe - including Gentiles - are the Temple!!
  - the Jerusalem temple is obsolete!
- This is the mystery that Paul preached, and that he is in prison for proclaiming
  - (his detention itself proclaims this mystery!)
  - this means nothing less than the completion of Judaism - now they can be brought in (v.6) together - all come to God in one way, through Christ
  - this is the mystery, that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus
  - no wonder the Jews have imprisoned Paul and felt so threatened by him!
- So Paul, languishing in prison, says:
  - "Don't be discouraged, don't burn out because of my sufferings - I'm here for your glory! If I hadn't preached what I did, you wouldn't be believers, Christians! OK, it put me in prison, but don't make my position make you doubt the actual message that has already changed and transformed you!"
- This is the issue - the spiritual forces today will still want us to question this message, to question Paul
- this is the application: they will not want to build our lives on what Paul is proclaiming, on this revelation that was given to him that will take us to Christ and to God
  - so they'll keep saying, raising issues that will make us say "Don't trust Paul" - so we don't trust the promise of rescue proclaimed through Paul
  - people say Paul hates Jews, he hates women, he hates gays, he's obsessed with guilt, he's distorted the message of Jesus... and so you can't trust him!
  - these are Satanic arrows to disrupt our trust, our confidence in this message which is ultimately the message of salvation
- Response - say "No, I trust this!"
- we will be very vulnerable to Satan if we have our doubts about this - the revelation is from God (v.5), and it brings me together with others into the mystery of Christ!
  - need to ask ourselves: "How am I putting Paul in prison? How am I refusing to trust this word, from God?" - otherwise we will be vulnerable to Satan's attacks

## **Stand Firm: Because you understand the Church (vs.7-13)**

- Second, to have confidence, to be rock solid, I must understand the church
  - building site: looks chaos, except for show-house at the edge of the site
  - its a visible demonstration of what will happen when the rest of the housing estate is built
  - despite all the chaos, you can see where the rest of the site is heading
- In v.7-13 the church is a bit like that
  - through Christ, and through Paul his messenger, God has built the church, a people who live under Christ in harmony, though they are surrounded at the moment by chaotic factions in a divided world - he's made a people (v.8) built on the unsearchable riches of Christ
  - that's what he's done, so all mankind can look at the church and see what God has in store for the world - in us God's plans, his intent, are made manifest - see v.10 - through the church!!
- This isn't just a picture church hanging on the wall, its actually the start of the universal union of all things together under Christ
  - and to whom does the church reveal God's wisdom?
  - (another remarkable facet of all this!)
  - to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms! (v.10)
  - those are the same words we started with, the spiritual forces of evil (6:12)
  - so the "rulers and authorities" of 3:10 are the same powers that battle against us in 6:12
  - it seems that just as we don't know the mystery of God until Paul reveals it to us, so the spiritual authorities don't know it either until God reveals it to them through us!
  - through the church!
  - Satan, look at us, the church, united under Christ, and see God's show-house!! His visual aid of the new creation
  - the spiritual powers look on - and tremble!
- The young Ephesian Christians wouldn't have thought that was what was happening!
  - even as we can hardly believe that is the spiritual reality we are part of!
  - but those spiritual powers are trembling - as we gather to pray, as we come to small groups, as we take time to pray for our fellow believers, as we give financially, as we are part of the show-house
  - those spiritual powers shudder and say "God has won! Here we are working away through sin and evil to try and break-up and destroy, but God has done this through Christ - he has defeated sin, he has brought people together - look what he's done in this church
- And its only a matter of time before God does this throughout the whole universe!

## **So What?**

- I must not despise the church!
  - tempting to despise - to look down on both Paul's revelation (part one) and also the church (part two)
  - but here we learn, in v.10, that the church is at the centre of history, at the heart of God's eternal purpose
  - the church may have many critics - and even many faults - but it has no rivals
  - so struggling, discouraged Christians, whether in Ephesians or Dundee, don't confuse circumstances with reality
  - the plot-line of history is in the church
  - BBC shouldn't take its cameras round the world to find the thread of world history, they should come in here - where lives are being changed that will last into eternity!
  - this is what the principalities and powers are watching, this is where their focus is!

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- Even though the church is the show-house for victory won, there is still fighting to be done!
  - the Christian life is still a battle
  - it is such a battle to be godly... and the evil forces are watching that - trying to work through our sin, pride, anger, selfishness, individualism... so when we feel isolated, cut off from the church family... that is Satan trying to cut us off, divide and isolate us
- But we are not like Jodie Foster in the Silence of the Lambs, in the dark, weak and vulnerable
  - we know the mystery - we are not in the dark
  - we have spiritual sight
  - we know where the world is going
- our very presence here this evening makes clear the victory being proclaimed through us to the spiritual powers who are watching
- **So: WE WILL WIN!**
  - may not feel like it - but this is the reality
- But, we still need to fight today
  - the show-house is not yet perfect
  - and in the remainder of the book of Ephesians Paul is going to describe to us how we should be living in God's show-house - and it couldn't be more important
    - because we are God's advertisement to the spiritual powers of what is going on at the centre of history!
    - we are not living anonymous little lives in a small city at the periphery of national life, a small and insignificant church on the edge - we are at the centre of history!
    - so when Paul calls us to be humble, gentle, forgiving, patient, careful with what we say, when calls husbands, wives, children, workers, employers to act in a certain way - all of this couldn't be more important
    - this is what is happening at the centre of history
- Your diary, and mine, for next week, how we live, how we love the church, it couldn't be more important
  - because all these things lead to the unity of the church being displayed to the universe, the mystery of Christ being unpacked
- One, never put Paul in prison with doubts - the revelation of God has been given to us through his writing
- Second, never put the church in prison, it is the centre of history. We will win - but we must fight now!