

Postcode lottery: Ephesians 1.15-23

TUESDAY APRIL 20TH EPHESIANS 1.15-23 Postcode lottery

Special thanks to Peter Pound for his comment on yesterday's TFTD picture. Here it is again in case you were puzzled too! PS the kingcups were photographed at Poynton Pool last week. I loved the way the clouds were rejected upside down.

It took me a while to figure out the photograph, originally I thought it was buttercups on a grass bank with a blue sky and wispy clouds through thin tendrils of willows.

I read your TFT and went back to the photograph and had a hard look. It was then that I realised that it was a reflection in a pond, a very appropriate photograph for the reading as it proved that we have to look more closely as we can be easily fooled, not everything is as we might first have thought. We miss so much in life by skipping through the details and missing the fundamentals, a 21st century trait I fear due to so many other things vying for our attention.



*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, “I couldn’t stop thanking God for you — every time I prayed, I’d think of you and give thanks.”*

The whole first half of this letter is one extended prayer. Paul starts with blessing and moves on to thanksgiving: Thank God for YOU, he goes on. Thank God for the church! Thank God that the church isn’t just about me and my friends (v.12) — it’s about you as well. Thank God that I can see God’s Spirit at work in you, see the way you are learning to trust in him — and the way you reach out in love to all God’s people, all of those of us who are learning to be “saints,” learning to let the light of God’s love shine through us to the world around.

Thank God for the church? That's one of the surprises of Ephesians. Many of us feel secretly that the church is the difficult part of Christianity — the part that puts people off. Yesterday we talked about being blessed by God and beloved by God. That's great, we can all sign up to that. But why bring the church into it? I read an interview with an American professor who talked about his difficulties with the church: "You aren't sufficiently transformed for me to believe that you believe in God, or that you believe the story you're telling me ... The way you live isn't sufficient testament to the truth." Ouch! Perhaps that's why many well-intentioned people feel they're better off trying to serve and worship God on their own.

But the church isn't an optional extra for Christians. When we're baptized, we become part of the church — the worldwide church, the whole body of Christians across time and space, what the Prayer Book calls "the blessed company of all faithful people". Even when we're isolated — even when we're socially distanced and covered in PPE! — we're part of something bigger, we're not alone.

As I mentioned yesterday, any of the ancient manuscripts of Ephesians have a blank space in the first line of this letter, which probably goes back to the original: "Paul, to God's people who are in _____ [fill in your own postcode] and are faithful in Christ Jesus". It's a letter from Paul to Christians everywhere — in Alderley Edge, in Wilmslow, in Bramhall, in Köln, in — wherever you are, reading this. Being a Christian means living in two places at once: living "in" [wherever we are], and living "in Christ", in the heavenly places (v.3, v.20), where we are seated with Christ.

Every Christian has two addresses, as William Barclay puts it: "a human address and a divine address. They live in a certain place in this world, but they also live in Christ. And that is precisely the secret of the Christian life. Alister MacLean tells of a lady in the West Highlands who lived a hard life, yet a life of perpetual serenity. When she was asked the secret of it, she answered, 'My secret is to sail the seas, and always to keep my heart in port.' The secret of the Christian serenity is that wherever the Christian is, we are still in Christ."

But we mustn't forget that we also have a postcode address! Being part of a local community is what makes our fellowship "in Christ" real and solid. It's what anchors our faith, makes it incarnate in the reality of human life — just as Jesus became incarnate in a particular human life, growing up in a particular family in a small town at a particular time and place in Roman Galilee. You know what they say — if you find the perfect church, don't join it — because if you do, it will immediately stop being perfect. No human fellowship is perfect (if it was, we

wouldn't be part of it). But if that kind of particularity — that kind of commitment to locality — was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

The Edwardian writer Evelyn Underhill was passionately interested in the spiritual life, especially the lives of the saints and mystics. She wasn't at first particularly interested in the life of her local church, which she found much more prosaic. "All this," she wrote, "seems terribly concrete to the enthusiast for 'pure spirituality': and when we think of pews and hassocks and the Parish Magazine, we tend to rebel against the yoke of official religion, with its suggestion of formalism and even frowstiness. [She obviously hadn't been to one of Robin's Family Services!] It seems far too stiff and institutional, too unventilated, to represent the generous and life-giving dealings of the Divine Charity. The chorus which exclaimed with awe and delight, 'I believe in one God!' thins out a good deal when it comes to saying, 'I believe in one Church!'. The first lifted us up to heaven; the second brings us down on to the cocoanut matting with a run. Yet there it is; the Christian sequence is God-Christ-Spirit-Church-Eternal Life. No link in this chain can be knocked out, without breaking the current of love that passes from God through his creatures back again to God." [Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity* (1934), p.92.]

*But I do more than thank. I ask — ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory — to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for us Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him — endless energy, boundless strength! (vv. 17-19, *The Message*).*

And that is what makes it so exciting to be caught up in the prayer life of that greater fellowship. Evelyn Underhill again: "Because of this deep fact of the Living Church, this interconnection of all surrendered spirits, the prayer of one unit can avail for all. We pray as an organism, not as a mere crowd of souls; like grains of rice that happen to be part of the same pudding. ... Here that rich New Testament word 'Communion' bears a double reference. For on the one hand it means that we believe in the whole fellowship, the society of saints, known and unknown, living and dead, their reality and power, their aliveness, their authority, their witness to the facts of the spiritual life; and on the other hand that we believe there is a true communion, a genuine sharing between all the members of the one Body. Within its universal prayer thinker and lover, sufferer and worker, Catholic and Quaker, pool their resources. ... The life by which they live is shared, communicated from one to another, as the sap of the Vine is given through the

greater branches to the less.”

So let's take time to read Paul's wonderful prayer and pray it for each other — that the endless energy, boundless strength of God's love may continue to be at work in us and in his church everywhere, “the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe”:

All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.

Not a postcode lottery but a glorious inheritance among the saints! Alleluia!
God bless,
Loveday

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