

6b) Salvation: By Grace Through Faith

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Ephesians 2:4-10

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My wife's family takes great delight in telling stories about her when she was a child. This is of course designed to cause her complete embarrassment and mortification, and they never seem to tire of this activity. One of their favourite stories is when my wife was taken at the age of two by her aunt and uncle for a day out in Weymouth. It was a lovely day, the sun was shining, egg sandwiches were made, it was going to be a wonderful day out. And indeed, it was - until my wife disappeared on the beach. They then talk about what happened during the next two hours. As frantic search parties were made, the Coast Guard was called out, and embarrassed phone calls were made home to say that this precious darling had been lost. Only for my wife then to rove into view after that time, saying to her aunt and uncle, "I don't know what you're crying about. I've been having a lovely time with this policeman lady."

Well, I wonder if you can think back to a time when you were lost. Maybe in a shop as a child. Maybe you got left on a train as another story of my wife's childhood goes. Maybe some other occasion like that. What are the emotional feelings and thoughts that set off in your heart as you recollect what that was like, that dread-sinking feeling of being lost? Well, I say that because being lost is right at the heart of that reading from Ephesians that we just listened to. Indeed, the language in chapter 2 is very, very abrupt. Twice the writer says to those who read his letter, "you were dead in your transgressions." And the word that the writer uses for 'transgressions' contains lots of ideas about being lost within it. That you've wandered off the path. Other translations say 'trespasses'. The idea that you've ended up being where you shouldn't have been. So, we might well read what Ephesians says as, "you were dead lost."

Now, we can receive this very individualistically. When we hear those words, we think “what have we done wrong?” It touches on our guilt and on our shame, but the world of Ephesians (and certainly the worldview of the writer) was much more social than individualistic. Pronouns in Ephesians are all plural. It talks about “us”. We've lost “our” way. Yes, because of what we've done as individuals. But more, I think, it's asking us to think how have we been lost *together* and that's not just about our own guilt. We're lost because of what's been done to us.

As a Bishop, I often spend time speaking to people who've been deeply damaged by others. And they are lost. We're lost too, because of the systems in which we find ourselves, which dehumanise us and prevent us from being the people we truly should be. So, the question for the Ephesians, is how to get a whole people back on the right track.

And this is complicated in this letter. Because of who the Ephesians were, the letter is written to a brand new church, which has brought together two very different communities who do not sit comfortably together. It contains those who follow Jesus coming from a Jewish heritage, and it contains those who have come to follow Jesus coming from a pagan background. So, these two groups are here in one church. But they have very, very different ideas of who they are and what they should do about living into all the promise that they've found in Jesus. So, you might think it's a church of Arsenal supporters and Tottenham supporters flung together. Or, maybe it's a bit more serious than that. Maybe it's a church of Brexit remainers and Brexit leavers put into one place. Or, at it's most severe, it's more like the Israeli government, and the leadership of Hamas, finding themselves in one gathering.

Now those who were of Jewish background, the New Testament tells us, understood themselves to be inheritors of the most special relationship with God. The Jews are God's chosen people. If you read a book like Hosea, then it's clear that the Jews are a people who are loved passionately by God. That God is jealous for them. So, in this community in Ephesus, those of Jewish heritage knew that they were loved by God. They knew too that they and their forebears had often failed to live up to that relationship. They were called to be holy. And they sought to live out that holiness by doing two things, by living into the fullness of the law that they had been given by God, and by reinforcing their identity as God's chosen people.

The problem that the New Testament identifies with this is that those things just didn't seem to work. It was good to say, "Yes, we're God's people." It's good to say, "Yes, we seek to follow God's law. But if we achieve that by working and working and working and working at it...". Well, then it's become a bit like a person with a parent or an employer who's always having to try harder and harder and harder to please them. It works for a while, but it ends up feeling like you're on a treadmill. And what happens when a treadmill gets too fast? You fall off backwards.

The pagans to whom Ephesians were written had a rather different problem. They didn't follow a rule book like their Jewish brothers and sisters. They followed all kinds of gods in the ancient world who they believed controlled their fate. But these so-called gods didn't have any commitment to the people who followed them. You could buy the gods' favour by offering them a sacrifice, and in return you'd kind of hope they'd watch over you and that things would be okay. But it wasn't really a relationship to be relied on. You didn't believe that the gods loved you in the way that the living God of Israel loves his people. The gods were pretty self-interested, and their attention might wander off at any moment. And then where would you be?

So, Ephesians is written to two lost groups. Both living far from the relationship with the living God for which every human heart is made. All of us carry within us a kind of God-shaped hole that's longing to be filled with all the love and compassion and security of knowing God. We can try and fill that space with all other kinds of stuff. But ultimately it just doesn't work. Only God will satisfy. And both these two groups were trying to get out of their lostness by using different strategies. One group by trying to get back into the Lord's good books, by having a clearly defined identity and keeping the rules. The other group getting into their gods' good books by buying them off. Problem was, neither strategy worked.

But they do have something in common. Both groups thought that it was up to them to sort out their problem, which was being lost. The problem for both groups was that their strategies were not sorting out the problem they faced. And their breakthrough, and what had called them to become this new church, was when they gave up on trying to be the solvers of their situation and come to realise that it had already been put right. But not by their efforts, not by them reaching out to God, but by God reaching out to them.

In Ephesians 2:4 it says this, "God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ." Imagine you're swimming on a beach and you've been swept out to sea. What do you do? Swim harder and harder and harder to try and fight against the tide? Ask that somehow fate will turn the tide round and sweep you back into the shore. That's what these two groups were doing in their lostness. My preference would be for the RNLI. And that's what these groups were offered in Jesus. The lifeboat who came to save them. Ephesians continues that this is what God does. In 2:6 it says this – "God raised us up with Christ." Our lostness, solved by God in his son Jesus, coming to find us through his death on the cross, and by rising to new life. And the breakthrough for the Ephesians (and the one that we need too) was to understand that God had made the first move to sort out their situation. God had come to find them. Not the other way around. They hadn't been able to find God.

Why had God done this? Because God loves us. As it says in 2:4, "God saves because of his great love for us." God acts as God does, not because we deserve God's help or have earned it by keeping rules or buying it. What Ephesians calls works. As it says in 2:8, "This is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God." And the invitation to us is to accept help, and receive God's free wonderful gift. It's what we call grace. As 2:8 says, "it is by grace that you have been saved." It's into this gift of grace that we baptised Hugo today. But as Hugo was baptised, I hope the invitation there was for each of us to think about our own baptism. We're still wet with the waters of baptism even if it happened years and years and years ago. It's what we carry with us as Christians every day of our life. And what we celebrated this morning, was that in baptism God has made the first move into Hugo's life just as he makes it into ours each and every day. Hugo hasn't had to earn God's love or buy it - God just loves Hugo just as God loves each of us. And as parents and godparents your most important job is to teach Hugo that that is the case.

It's not easy because, like the rest of us, Hugo will come under lots of pressure during his life to see things otherwise. He'll grow up in a world where many people, just like those pagans back in Ephesus, think that if there is a God, well, it's a bit distant, a bit disinterested. As parents and godparents, your job is to teach Hugo that God loves him completely. That God is passionately concerned with every aspect of Hugo's life, just as he's concerned with every aspect of our lives. We live in a world where many people, just like those back in Ephesus, think that they have to earn God's love. One of the most tragic things which can affect any of us that God will only want us if we keep his rules be good, and work harder Please teach Hugo that he doesn't need to do a to earn or deserve God's love. Teach Hugo that his challenge is simply to accept that God who loves him, has already saved him, and is constantly reaching out to him. Teach him about grace.

But the amazing thing is that if we can accept that we live by grace, that changes us from the inside out. It enables us to be the people we would love and long and hope to be. In Ephesians 2:10 we're described as being "God's handiwork". What a heritage for each of us to claim and own - knowing that when we live in the security of knowing ourselves to be loved, that we're found, that through God's spirit alive and at work in us, then we're given the ability to grow and develop, to take risks to live into the fullness of life for which we are intended. Or, as Ephesians 2:10 puts it, "enabled to do good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do." When we know ourselves to have been found, we are changed from the inside out.

So, our good news is that we're not lost. We have been found being found isn't our job it's God's job. And God has done it in his Son, Jesus, because God loves us and God wants us. And, having found us, God wants his transforming presence to be at work in our lives, changing us every day from the inside out, to be the people who live God's way in the world. It is "by grace that we have been saved through faith and this is not from ourselves it is from God."

So, as I finish, let's sing. I think you know the words, you don't need them on the screen. They're right here in our hearts. Sing with me:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found,
was blind but now I see.*

*T'was grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

Amen