

“The Unsearchable Riches of Christ”

They were like oil and water. That’s an interesting expression that has no doubt been used to describe a great many people and things. Oil and water don’t fit together. They don’t mix. Sure, you can combine them and shake them up or stir them and get oil and water to be mixed together for a time, but they will always separate again and settle out. It takes something special, like a soap or some other chemical to really get them to combine.

That oil and water comparison really is a decent illustration of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles throughout much of Bible history. Of course, generally speaking, Gentiles refers to any person of any nationality other than that of the Jews.

After God chose Abraham and his descendants to carry forward the promise of the Savior, and as he blessed them and made their numbers increase greatly, the Israelites or the Jews were set apart. They acted in ways that were different from the nations and peoples around them. They had special laws and rules and regulations that they followed. They avoided marrying many of the foreigners and were intentional about remaining separate.

Yes, there were times and there were instances when some Gentiles had a close association with Jews, but in general these times and instances were few and far between. For many, many years, the Gentiles and the Jews were like oil and water.

But God’s plan was never a permanent separation between nations. It was never to keep Jews and Gentiles apart for good. As we celebrate the Epiphany today, we are celebrating that God made it clear, clear to us and clear to anyone who would pay attention, that Jesus is the Savior not only of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles, also of us, indeed, the Savior of the world. God made it clear by leading the Magi by a star to visit the young King. God unfolded that truth at various times in Jesus’ earthly ministry, but it was never more clear than when God called Paul to serve as his Apostle to the Gentiles. The words of our sermon text today are Paul’s own explanation of how God made it clear through him. Together with Paul, today we celebrate the unsearchable riches of Christ. This was once hidden, but now it has indeed been made known.

Paul writes: “Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

Several times in these verses, Paul uses an interesting word: mystery. In fact, the Greek word sounds very much like the English translation. But this sort of mystery is not what we normally think of. It’s not the sort of mystery we find in a book or a movie. In fact, the mystery that Paul talks about is no longer a mystery. It is no longer a secret. This sort of mystery is something that we know, but only because God has revealed it to us. Apart from this revelation, it would have always stayed a mystery. In fact, this mystery remained hidden for some time. In previous generations, it was not known.

But through Paul and other apostles, God had fully revealed the truth that Jews and Gentiles alike were being welcomed into the kingdom of God. Our translation says that the “Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” For generations it had been clear that the Israelites were heirs of God’s promise. They had been the ones through whom God passed down the promise. They waited patiently as the promise was expounded on and as it unfolded. The faithful among them trusted that God would keep that precious promise to free them from sin and death.

As God kept his promise and as Jesus did his work, God removed the barrier that had kept the Israelites separate from others. And God selected Paul specifically to carry the message of God's promise completed to the Gentiles. Now they were co-heirs. They had an inheritance in heaven along with all of God's people.

Now Gentiles were co-members of the body of Christ. Every part had and has a role to play. Only together is the body complete. And they are co-sharers in the promise. No longer were Jews on the inside and everyone else on the outside. God's promise is and was for the whole world. In grace God had chosen Israel. They had nothing in themselves to earn or deserve any special treatment from God. And in grace God had showered his love on all people. Every bit of God's revelation and his promise drove home the point that it was completely by grace and in no way earned or deserved.

See, there is another situation that ought to be like oil and water. That's the relationship between a holy God and imperfect people. In the beginning, God created people to have a relationship with him. Adam and Eve were able to walk with God and talk with God. In the perfect world of creation, God's relationship with his people was also perfect. But when sin entered the world, the relationship was destroyed. Oil and water. God demands perfection and people could never attain it.

So God stepped in. He stepped in with his promise, and then he stepped in to carry out his promise. He sent his own dear son to restore a broken relationship. He restored a relationship between a perfect God and his people by making his people perfect. By his life and death he removed the barrier of sin.

This is why Magi came to worship the young King. They knew- they believed- that Jesus would make them holy. They trusted that in this little boy God was carrying out his promise for them. Even though they deserved none of it, God was welcoming them into his kingdom.

And God continued to welcome Gentiles into his kingdom, making Paul his spokesperson to them. Through his testimony and his work, Gentiles would come to know the unsearchable riches of Christ. Through him and his testimony, God would leave no doubt remaining that there was no difference any longer between Jew and Gentile, that God's promise was for all people.

This is how Paul describes the work that God had set before him: "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord"

By grace God called Paul to his apostolic position. By grace Paul was a servant of the gospel. God's eternal purpose was being carried out. The church, God's church, was growing and incorporating not only Jews but also Gentiles. Through the church, God's wisdom and grace was being demonstrated. By grace, you and I are members of that church. This is the church we testified about when we said, "We believe in one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church."

God has called us as members of his holy church to carry forward the message that God's promise is for all people. Like Paul, we do not deserve to be God's spokespeople, but by grace that is what he has made us. We are celebrating the Epiphany on the first Sunday of a brand new year. What a wonderful time it is to recommit ourselves to the work of carrying God's message forward. We do it with lives that are set apart for our God. We do it with offerings that are given in his name. We do it with words that speak of his love and salvation.

God has revealed to us the unsearchable riches of Christ. He has united Jew and Gentile. He has established a relationship with sinful people and made them holy. He has revealed the message to us and has invited us to share with others the unsearchable riches of Christ.

The Text: Ephesians 3:2–12 (NIV84)

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.