

Rooted and grounded

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning is what we sometimes call a 'purple passage' - one where the writer seems to take off and the language seems to soar and we are caught up in the power and poetics of the oratory. As in so much of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul is striving to express something of the wonder of God, and how do you begin to bend and to stretch language in order to articulate such exalted mysteries when words simply fail? Paul's solution is to resort to long, winding sentences as he piles up phrase after phrase, with words colliding and falling over one another as he tries to communicate the greatness of God – or, as he says, the 'fullness' of God as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Such a passage presents a problem, though, to the preacher. How do you preach on it? If the writer's words fail you are only going to add further failure. Why not just leave the passage alone, let it speak for itself which would at least make for a short service?

Well, my strategy is to just focus on one phrase in the reading, to extract just one snippet from this great tapestry of rhetoric. It's the phrase in verse 17 that speaks of being 'rooted and grounded in love' as Christ dwells in our hearts. Paul pictures us as 'Rooted and grounded in love' and he goes on to pray that we may have power to comprehend the dimensions, the breadth and length and height and depth of that love. And note the two images here: of being like a plant rooted and like a building grounded. It's a picture of stability and firmness, of being fixed and centred in God's love. And why I think that is significant is because the letter to the Ephesians is full of images that conjure up the very opposite of the fixed and the stable and the grounded. So, for example, in chapter 2 of the letter Paul describes the world apart from God and apart from Christ as like aliens in a foreign land – in other words they are rootless, wanderers without a true home, strangers without a place to belong. And that contrast between the unstable and the shifting on the one hand and the rooted and the grounded on the other is found again in the next chapter of Ephesians. There Paul cautions Christians against being buffeted and blown about by the winds of false ideas and teaching, and he contrasts that with being held together and bonded tightly in the body of Christ.

So perhaps you get the picture. For Paul there is something about the human condition that is expressed vividly in the image of the wanderer, the person whose life is ungrounded and rootless and without foundations – someone who is deeply vulnerable and at risk of being blown off course. And that is an image that can be traced right back to the beginning of the Bible and the story of Cain and Abel that we read from the book of Genesis. There we read of how Cain slays his brother Abel in a fit of pique and receives the divine sentence for his misdeed: ‘you will be a wanderer and fugitive on the earth’. Cain has become dislocated, homeless, deeply insecure. Indeed it’s interesting that God also says to him, ‘you are cursed from the ground’ and there seems to be a sense there of being uprooted, dislodged from the earth like a tree in a storm.

This is the image given to us by these ancient narratives. It’s how we are portrayed. As human beings we have been created to find our home, our security, our stability in God but we have become detached, losing our grounding in God and being uprooted from the earth. We have become children of Cain: rootless, restless wanderers forever in search of rest and of roots. We might think of W.B. Yeats’ great poem, *The Second Coming* with its image of disconnect and disintegration:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

Things fall apart – the centre cannot hold! Or we might think of that great theologian of the Christian Church, St Augustine, whose own experience of finally submitting to God was expressed in his saying, ‘our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.’

And of course that image of rootless vulnerability takes on particular poignancy right now when refugees and asylum seekers and huge masses of displaced people are such a feature of our world. But we could think of this at a deeper cosmic level as well. In our recent midweek fellowship we were thinking of issues of science and faith and recognising how our understanding of the universe has changed so dramatically. Go back 400 years and imagine the universe people were living in then. It was one which had the earth at its very centre, fixed and immovable with the stars and the planets revolving around us like a carousel, and there is something very reassuring about such a universe

We are at home here, grounded and centred. But now of course all that has changed. Suddenly there is no centre in this vast, expansive, expanding universe and we are just one tiny planet revolving around one tiny sun in just one of a zillion galaxies and who knows, maybe just one of a zillion universes. And suddenly the cosmos feels a less hospitable place and we feel a sense of being lost and buffeted by a universe coldly indifferent to our existence.

Or turn your eyes away from the stars and focus a little closer to home. One of the joys of coming to a new country as Sally and I have is visiting some of the smaller, rural towns and villages where of course so often you find at the very centre of the community the church, with its spire pointing up to the heavens. There it stands, the symbol of stability, fixed and unchanging, reminding us of God in our midst. And there people gathered at those great moments of change, those rites of passage – birth and marriage and death, baptisms and weddings and funerals. Or as Summer ended and the autumn winds began to blow the community would bring in the harvest and give thanks and prepare for the winter. It was in those seasons of change and of transition that people returned to the centre. Threatened by the unsettling flux of time they sought the firm foundation of the eternal, needing to be re-rooted, re-grounded in the unchanging. There life was re-oriented, re-centred, re-aligned with its true source and goal. But it's all vanishing now and as children of Cain we have nowhere to turn.

But here is Paul, speaking of being rooted and grounded in love. And our vision of the universe may not be Paul's but whatever the scientist may say about it this is no scattered, de-centred universe for there pulses at its heart the steady beat of love. And the source of that love and its origin is the God whose fullness dwelt in Jesus of Nazareth and in whom are lives are rooted and grounded. And just note the effect of this. What are the consequences of being thus planted and founded upon such love? Well, listen again to Paul's prayer in these verses. Listen again to verse 16 where Paul prays that 'you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's spirit. 'Strengthened in your inner being...' - here is an inner stability, a resilience that enable us to stand firm against the blows and buffetings that life may rain upon us. There is a defiance that comes from being rooted and grounded in love.

Because we have had a baptism in the service this morning I can't help but be reminded again of the great Reformer Martin Luther whose life was often under threat, and who was prone to depression and experiences of deep

darkness when he felt that the devil had his talons in his soul. And in those moments Luther would cry out in Latin, ‘baptizus sum!’ – ‘I have been baptised!’, for his baptism was the tangible symbol that his life was rooted and grounded in Christ. His baptism was the tangible sign that his life was held firm and fast in the grip of love. And we say this therefore for little David this morning and for all of us who have been baptised: our baptism is our grounding, our rooting in Christ and for little David and for us our lives are forever held tight in Christ and anchored, whatever life may throw at us.

I’m reminded in this context of a very dear friend of our family, a dear, young wife and mother of two small children who was diagnosed with cancer from which she eventually died. And I remember once having a discussion with her about healing and she said, ‘I don’t feel that I’m being healed, but I feel that I’m being held’. Not healed, but held - and in her case that gave her an astonishing grace and poise, a courage and serenity even in the worst ravages of her disease. What she was expressing was the experience of being planted in Christ, rooted and grounded in a love whose fullness fills up all the space between the stars.

This, friends, is the Gospel. This is the good news for us rootless, restless children of Cain. This is the source of that strengthening in our inner being that Paul speaks of. And so we close with these exalted words, these poor, inarticulate words struggling to express the inexpressible trying to say what words cannot adequately convey, this prayer of Paul’s: that ‘Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love... that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love that surpasses words or knowledge.’ Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
 Our Maker, our lover,
 Our source and our true home,
 We worship and praise you in whom we find true rest,
 In whom we discover our true selves and our true name.
 We worship you, alpha and omega, beginning and end,
 the one in whom all things are gathered up
 and all that is broken made whole and restored.
 And you have come to us in Jesus Christ,

revealing to us the dimensions of your grace –
the breadth and length and height and depth
of immeasurable love.

O God forgive us that we have strayed from you,
That we have left home and wandered into the far country,
And there we have become rootless wanderers, forever seeking rest.
Come God, once more. Come to us with extended arms
and welcome us home, back where we belong –
with you and in you.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus,
And in his word we pray together and say...

O Go we pray today for the rootless,
for people uprooted from their homes
and their familiar surroundings and cast adrift –
adrift on the sea, adrift in refugee camps,
adrift on the unknown.
without security and fearing for the future.
And we pray for the homeless,

for those who must find shelter in hostels,
or on the street and who are condemned to drift
O God re-centre your world,
and gather our scattered family together in Jesus Christ.

Gracious God,
in our broken and disjointed world,
we thank you for all who work
for peace and reconciliation,
knocking down walls and healing divisions.
We thank you for all involved in aid agencies,
keeping on keeping to bring hope and new life in places
others might have abandoned.
And we think today especially of the Corrymeela Community
in its fiftieth year of breaking down
the walls of division in Northern Ireland,
thanking you for its courage and commitment.
Bless its celebrations and prosper its work,
for your love's sake.

O living God,
You give us a vision of reconciliation,
of one human family, united and named after our divine parent,
rooted and grounded in your love.
Wherever your purposes of love are thwarted, O God,
Wherever your purposes are resisted
by every abuse of power,
every polluted river,
every starving child,
every homeless refugee,
every mutilated woman,
empower your people to wrestle and fight and pray
for justice, truth and right.
And God bless those in special need today:
The housebound, the anxious, the sick.
May they know that they are held in your love and in our prayers,
And we remember especially Diana L'Noel in hospitable.

And God,
at this holiday time,
when people travel widely for rest and recreation,
may they journey safely
and return refreshed,
And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord,
Amen.