

The song we've just sung – *What a friend we have in Jesus* – is of course about prayer, an encouragement to prayer, but it's also about **access** to God; un/neath the appeal, the urge to get us to pray is this thought: we now have access to God. He listens & he urges us to listen to Him. & this is because of what God has done thru Jesus – His death has opened up for all of us who believe this gateway of access to God. & that amazing news is what Pl is writing about here to the Ephesians.

& he reveals it as a **mystery**; in fact the word **mystery** is the crops up again & again in this passage from Ephesians. It fits the day in the liturgical year because an "epiphany" is a manifestation of something. And in this case what's revealed has been a mystery.

The term "mystery" appears several times in just a few verses – it really grabs our attention. In Casa Foggitt, we find it v. hard to resist a good mystery. Paul says that a mystery has been made known to him about Jesus. No one has really understood this mystery 'cos it's been hidden (v9), but those who listen will come to know & un/st'.

Traditionally mysteries often follow a set form. The classic mysteries are set in a country house perh in Scotland with a small cast of characters: an elderly widow, a servant with peculiar habits & maybe a peculiar **walk**, and a distant relative who has inexplicably shown up for a visit after many years. The usual event is a tragic death, which turns out to be a murder. As the detective investigates the case, he often finds that there is intrigue going on over who is to inherit a fortune. The clues are discovered, but the police are confused and follow the wrong track. Eventually the master detective solves the case and shows how the pieces of the story fit together. In the final pages, the mystery is solved. The meaning is made known to the readers. The story is over.

The mystery that Paul describes varies from this standard pattern of a mystery story in at least three ways: first, the heart of the story is not s'th' tragic, like theft and murder – at least, no ordinary murder - but something magnificent - a gift. Also, it's is an inheritance case. Paul is speaking about the Gentiles coming into the inheritance of salvation. In a typical mystery story, one of the heirs to an estate usually plots to get the whole inheritance for **hmslf**. The idea is to exclude others from the gift, so that one heir can have it all.

In **Ephesians**, though, the story, the mystery being revealed is all about God giving the inheritance away to **many** people. What's **different** is that God has written a whole **new** group of heirs into his will. This doesn't short-change the

people who were heirs **before**, because there are "boundless riches" in Christ - there is plenty to go around. So the mystery in this case is the mystery of grace.

2^{ndly}, Paul does not work with a **small** cast of characters but he writes in **cosmic** terms about what God's doing. This is a story that has to do with the huge group of people known as the Gentiles, so it's way too big for a classic manor house mystery - it takes up the whole world.

Now, what we need to un/st' is that the Gentiles are an extremely **unlikely** group for God to be including in the inheritance. Y'see Gentiles were people who worshiped other **gods**. They thought **nothing** of the God of Israel. So Pl's message - that these people were now being included in God's people - was so **offensive** to the Jews of Pl's day that they had him arrested for saying it. & that's why he's in prison. But Pl's saying that thru Christ, God has called the Gentiles to faith in a new way. He recognises that sin separates **ev'one** from God - whether they're Jews, Christians, atheists or whatever; we're all separated from God by sin. So everyone - Jews and Gentiles - have the **same** need of grace.

3^{rdly}, this means that the revelation of the mystery is not the end of the story. It creates a whole new **beginning**. The usual pattern is that once the mystery is revealed, we can close the book. The case is solved. But for Paul, the revelation of the mystery is just the **beginning**. If God has extended the promise of an inheritance to the Gentiles, this opens up a vast new chapter. & Paul is in the business of making public that awesome fact.

But this wasn't a revelⁿ that many Jews were **happy** with: the idea that barbarians, pagans, Gentiles - wh'ev' you want to call them - were to be welcomed into God's family was **horrible**! If you study **Jesus'** life & ministry at all, you'll see a v. similar impetus & drive - to welcome the lost sheep, the leper, the sinful woman, the prodigal son. Js' **life** enacted the plan that was revealed to Paul: that God was welcoming in all those who had previously been **excluded**.

So what does this say to us here, today, in AMS? Well, it urges us to **welcome** those who, because of their culture, religious background, skin colour, language, sexuality, gender, age or disability, are despised or treated as of lesser worth. & it's imp't, not just for the politically-correct reasons we're familiar with these days, but for the deeper purpose we have today... 'Cos Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation - God become man in Js, Emmanuel, God

with us – & that gt celebration, flows into the celebration of the **Church**. As we **exhibit** unity - of different races, classes, and genders - we display the mystery of God who brings all his creation together in the unity of the God-man, the Jewish baby worshipped by the Gentile kings from the East.

& of course the gt worship-**expression** of that unity is **Communion** – the word itself speaks of coming together in unity, with God & w. one another. It's about human dignity: standing before God, free to love & to w/sh' & **empowered** by love to overcome the barriers to unity. May that thought remain with us as we share in a few moments in the Lord's Supper.

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