

Trinity 16 2nd October 2022 sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

St Mary's, 8 am

Ephesian 3.19

Today's epistle from the letter to the Ephesians contains one of the most remarkable passages in the New Testament. It is a prayer. A prayer in which Paul asks first that we might be strengthened in our inner being, secondly that Christ might dwell in our hearts, thirdly, that we might know the breadth and length, the depth and height of the love of Christ, even though it is beyond knowledge and finally, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

What an extraordinary claim 'That you may be filled with all the fullness of God'. How can this be? And what does it mean?

Nothing would exist unless moment by moment God held it in existence. All things are radically dependent on God the ground of our being, the fount from all things flow. God, as it were pours us into existence. Furthermore every Christian knows from their own experience that any good we may do comes from the grace of God.

As St Paul put it, although he had worked harder than anyone, 'not me but the grace of Christ within me' God not only pours us into being, he pours his grace into us.

But this is not easy. There is a blockage. Humanity is alienated, estranged from God. The pipe needs unblocking and this where the two letters, to the Ephesians and the Colossians come into play. Fundamental is Colossians 2.9

For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied.

In Christ, the flow of God into humanity is unimpeded. It fills him in perfect mutual love, in utter oneness with the Father. But God's purpose is to spread that oneness out. Through Christ we are all called to share in that mutual indwelling, albeit in our human, finite way. Hence today's text, that through Christ we, together with the whole church, are to be filled with all the fullness of God. However, this is not the end of the matter, for God's purpose to unite heaven earth,

begun in Christ, carried on through us, is to encompass the whole universe. As Ephesians 1.23 puts it, the church is ‘His body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.’

When we think of fullness, we might think of a jug pouring out liquid into a glass until it is full. But we could think of light pouring in through a clear window and lighting up a dark room. When we turn away from ourselves to divine love, that light shines, not so much on our face as light up and fill the dark inside.

When the famous theatre director Lilian Bayliss died they found a prayer in her handbag written by W. J. Carey. I end with the beginning of that prayer, which takes up the image of being filled.

O Holy Spirit of God –

Come into my heart and fill me:

I open the windows of my soul to let thee in.

I surrender my whole life to thee:

Come and possess me, fill me with light and truth.

I offer to thee the one thing I really possess,

My capacity for being filled by thee.

Of myself I am unprofitable servant,

An empty vessel.

Fill me so that I may live the life of the Spirit:

The life of truth and goodness, the life of beauty and love,

The life of wisdom and strength.

And guide me today in all things:

Guide me to the people I should meet or help:

To the circumstances in which I can best serve thee,

Whether by my action, or by my sufferings.