

SERMON

I wonder if like me, you were struck by some of the very profound and meaningful sentiments that were expressed in that Liturgy of Baptism for Zante. I especially loved these words

**As the community of faith, we rejoice at the baptism of Xante.
We will share with this child what we ourselves have received ...
a delight in prayer – a love for the Word of God –
a desire to follow the way of Christ - and food for the journey.**

And then we prayed ... **Xante you are now a pilgrim with us, and may you grow in the Holy Spirit, and follow Christ your whole life long.**

Beautiful words and for me, this why we gather here every Sunday?

Whatever our age or background, we come, to celebrate, nurture and nourish our spiritual formation in Jesus Christ. To go deeper in our understanding of what it looks like to live more authentically as followers of Christ. Not fans of Christ, but followers of Christ. His way and his truth, as revealed in his life and teachings. This is our spiritual food for the journey. And we are all pilgrims, all of us, on this journey together. **And why do we do this?**

So that day by day, week by week, we become what Paul expresses in verse 19. **“filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”** The journey to become more fully human, more fully alive.

And I would ask, is there anything in life more exciting - more important than our spiritual journey of formation. Because wherever we are in our faith journey, there's always more to discover! More ways to have our eyes and hearts opened to the presence of God in every single aspect of our lives. More to learn, about how wide, how long, how high, how deep this love of Christ really is. Be it in the really tough and painful times, that can often make no sense, or the good and precious times.

So what better food for our journey of 2021, than this truly beautiful and inspirational prayer of St Paul, read by Evan.

It's actually called 'Paul's prayer for Spiritual growth' and for me it's a profound expression of what ALL church communities should aspire to be. Individually and collectively.

But there's one really big truth in this prayer that I want to focus on today, because I believe that it can encourage and inspire all of us in our own spiritual formation. In this prayer, Paul really does reveal to us... **the KIND of God he believes in and the KIND of Jesus Christ he follows.**

Why is this so crucial for our spiritual growth and formation?

Because how we understand and relate to God (as in Father, Son and Holy Spirit) will have a profound impact on how we engage with every aspect of life. Our relationships, our ethics, our own sense of self. And most importantly, who we want to become.

But just before we unpack this prayer, let's just pause and remind ourselves of the man behind the prayer. Because it's important to stress, that these aren't just nice religious words.

This is a man, who has definitely been through the mangle of life. He was put in prison - badly beaten up – stoned almost to death and shipwrecked. Just to add insult to injury, he was even criticised and ridiculed by the very people in the very churches that he set up and started. His own brothers and sisters in Christ.

And yet, Paul doesn't let any of this, crush his spirit. He doesn't let any of this, diminish his faith in God or in people. Even in the testing times, For Paul this is always about one abiding aspiration. A lifelong journey, **to be filled with the measure of ALL the fullness of God. To be fully human and fully alive in Christ**

And what was the fruit of this immense faith?

Well, this is the man who became the greatest evangelist and spreader of the gospel the world has ever seen? A man who worked tirelessly to bring the 'boundless riches of Christ' to a movement, that has literally changed the heart of humanity.

So it begs a big question.

What was it that gave Paul this extraordinary capacity?

And how can this speak into your spiritual formation and my formation in Christ?

What I believe this prayer shows us, is that Paul found this extraordinary capacity, because he was shaped and formed... **by the kind of God, he believed in. And the kind of Jesus he followed.** Just listen to the language he uses to paint the picture of the kind of God he believes in.

Verse 14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. Paul believes in a God whose creative power and divine fingerprint is involved in ALL of Creation. EVERYTHING in Creation

Verse 16 I pray that out of his unlimited resources God may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being. However difficult Paul's circumstances, however much he was tested ... I find it very telling, that Paul never lost sight of the truth, that he could call upon the unlimited resources of God's Holy Spirit to strengthen him to the core of his inner being. **How can this speak wisdom and encouragement for you and I, in our times of testing?**

Verse 17-18 And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have the power to understand, as all God's people should, **how wide, how long, how high, and how deep is the love of Christ.**

As much as we may use the word 'love' (as in Christ shaped love) ... isn't it the truth, that we all struggle to fully grasp the power of this love to heal and transform all that is broken and hurting? In the world around us and in our own life.

And how profound and telling are these final words from Paul, about the kind of God he believes in?

20 Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish **infinitely** more than we might ask or imagine.

4 key words in that prayer reveal all that we need to know about the kind God Paul believes in and the kind of Christ he follows. **Everything - Unlimited - Fullness – Infinite.**

I believe that the reason Paul accomplished the truly staggering feats that he did ... is because the God he believed in, hoped in, and placed his complete trust in, is the God fully revealed in Jesus Christ, as the God of unlimited and infinite love.

So how does all of this speak to your understanding of God?

And what can it say for your spiritual formation and mine?

One of the deep spiritual truths of life, is that **'we become what we behold.'**

How we understand and relate to God through Christ, will shape how we understand and relate to all aspects of life and faith.

So how expansive, is your God?

Do you see God as some sort of **'critical spectator'** watching life from afar just waiting to pounce, judge and smite you? A God who is the **'eternal threatener'?**

Or do you see God as the **ultimate participant?** A God inherent in 'LIFE' itself.

How Big is the Christ you follow?

Do you ever put limits on the boundaries of Christ's love and grace?

To others and to yourself.

It's very difficult to love others, if we don't particularly think a lot of ourselves.

Do you recognise the Holy Spirit, as THE creative force who is present in every thought, word and deed, that leads to the way of love?

Present in everything that reflects and radiates truth, beauty and goodness.

These are important questions raised by Paul's prayer for our won formation.

If we put limits on God's presence, power and purposes. If we put limits on the power of love to heal and transform. Of who we include or exclude. If we put limits on the

capacity of the Holy Spirit to work in surprising and mysterious ways ... then we limit our potential to be filled with ALL the FULLNESS of God. Fully human fully alive.

**ALL OF WHICH, BRINGS US TO WHAT FOR ME, IS THE MOST INTRIGUING VERSE
IN THE WHOLE PRAYER IN VERSE 19**

And in many ways for me, this is the wisdom that can take our spiritual growth and formation to the deeper places. The deeper places of the Holy Spirit's work.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep is the love of Christ, 19 **and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—**

Ponder those words of verse 19 **“to know this love of Christ, that surpasses our knowledge”**

How can we know something that surpasses our know-ledge?

Isn't our knowledge limited to that which we can reason and affirm?

Well let me ask you a telling question.

How many of you have had the experience of having a strong intuitive sense about something or someone? But you ignored it, reasoned yourself out of it, only to realise later, you really should have listened to this deeper knowing, because it surpassed your knowledge

And the more I thought about this **'deeper kind of knowing'**, the more I thought about my own journey. And I realised just how many times I've actually experienced this kind of deeper knowing of Christ, that goes beyond mere knowledge.

And I'll conclude with the time, that was incredibly pivotal to my whole faith journey and spiritual formation.

Back in the year 2000, Kim and I were attending our 3rd Alpha course in 3 years. As I've said many times, I was deeply compelled and captivated by the person of Christ, but I was still struggling with the 'resurrected Son of God bit'. I was struggling to overcome my intellectual head doubts.

At this point in my faith journey, I was helping out in the worship band, singing and playing guitar. But clearly not ready to be given the responsibility of leading worship. You can't really have a worship leader who's not sure about the resurrection. **Or so I thought.**

One day, I turned up for rehearsals and the Rev Iain Gow told me that they had a worship leader crisis due to illness and said to me... "will you lead the worship on Sunday Josh"? And I said, well thanks for the vote of confidence Iain, but I'm still struggling with the resurrection bit and I don't think it's appropriate that I lead worship".

In a nutshell, Iain said ... “you’ll be fine Josh... just go for it”. And he pushed me into the deep waters.

Now I know many a church who would faint at this thought. **But here’s the thing**

As I was diligently practising the songs for the Sunday. Praying to God to lead and guide me in my nervousness. I was playing the songs **‘Jesus be the Centre and ‘I will offer up my life’** by Matt Redman, which were incredibly formative in my Christian journey. And as I was playing them, I just began to weep. I just had this incredibly powerful sense of the presence of Christ.

It always hard to explain these things to others. But I just KNEW, to the very core of my inner being, that this was real. That this transforming love of Christ, was speaking to the very depths of who I am... and even more importantly, who I wanted to be. The deeper knowing of my heart, surpassed my head knowledge.

I’m still astonished and grateful to this day, at just how much this pivotal moment has changed and transformed my life. Its why this prayer of St Paul resonates so deeply and powerfully to me.

So I leave you with these words of St Paul for your lives and you journey of 2021.

I20 Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or imagine.

Let’s pray...

Loving God, let this prayer of Paul, be all of our prayer for 2021. That we will stay rooted and established in the *expansive* love of Jesus Christ. That we can have a deeper knowing of how You are at work in *everything* to redeem, restore and bring peace.

We pray, that however difficult and testing our circumstances may be, help us to never lose sight of the *unlimited* resources that you can strengthen us with, to the core of our inner being. And to always remember that because of your mighty power at work within us, we can accomplish *infinitely* more than we might ask or imagine. So that individually and collectively, we here at St George’s will be filled to measure of *all your fullness*. Pilgrims together, on a journey to become more Fully human, fully alive, in Christ. AMEN.

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REFLECTION SLIDE AFTER SERMON

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force, present in every thought, word and deed,
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