

That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith...

Sixteenth Sunday After Trinity

(From the Epistle: *Ephesians 3:13-21*)

King James Version (KJV): *13 Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. 14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. 20 Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, 21 Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

New International Version (NIV): *13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. 14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

Life is full of fragile, precious things. Maybe it's a beloved relative... a child, or an elderly parent, or a lifelong spouse, and every moment with them seems like a priceless keepsake. Or perhaps it's an heirloom, something which is irreplaceable that invokes the past, and we look for some way to protect or preserve it. Or an endangered species of plant or animal, hovering on the verge of extinction, for which all-out efforts are made to ensure its survival.

But our Epistle speaks of another possession of immeasurable value. It is unique, in that it is invisible, and yet it is the key to all things spiritual. It has never by any means been common, but one might confidently say that today especially it is in exceedingly short supply. Many claim ownership of it, but rather few can summon the evidence to verify it. It would be safe to assert that an enormous amount of the world's arsenal of evil is focused specifically and primarily against it. It cannot be purchased, or inherited, or easily acquired. It is as easily lost as something that slips through the fingers. It must be carefully guarded and protected at all costs. It can be planted in the hearts of others, but must be nurtured and encouraged with love and care.

This item, of course, is *faith*, and I am thinking especially of Ephesians 3:17a: *That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith....* Allow me to introduce some other familiar verses of Scripture:

-Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

-For we walk by faith, not by sight...(2 Corinthians 5:7)

-These [trials] have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:7)

That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.... This means, in spite of all evidence to the contrary... Regardless of a world full of concrete, scientific evidence that speaks mightily and convincingly against it... Even if my own personal experience urges me to dismiss it, my emotions pressure me to deny it, and my rational mind argues that it's not real... If everything that I can see, touch, taste, and feel insists that it doesn't exist...

There is no other way for Christ to dwell in my heart. It's not big enough to house Him. Besides, the heart St. Paul speaks of is itself also invisible. It has no physical shape or form. It cannot be detected or described. For want of better words, it is the very center of my being from which issues forth my will, my thoughts, my purposes. It is an invisible place that can be filled only with invisible things: either goodness, virtue, truth, light, and even God, or sins, evil, darkness, and even the devil.

Elsewhere, the apostle writes: *...we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18)*. This is an astonishing statement, for it implies that that invisible realm which faith alone perceives is far, far more significant than the entire visible universe which commands our senses, begs for exploration and discovery, and fascinates the mind of man, equipped for its investigation as never before.

But we are being called by Christ away from that spectacle, and as we depart from the cinema, so to speak, while the movie is still in progress, we are relentlessly pursued by the world's faithless hucksters: "Where are you going? Not back to your pointless, romantic, baseless, silly notions of faith, are you? Why do you drum up and cling to these illusions in your head? Mature, modern men and women don't bother themselves with such things. Shame on you!"

The more we gaze with eyes of faith at the world of faith, the greater that dimension will become for us. Indeed, it will grow to be of such significance and importance that living within it, and preparing ourselves for it, will become the very center of our entire lives, far more than mere religious window-dressing, or a sanctified sentiment that makes us feel good on Sunday and helps us fear death and hell a little less.

That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.... St. Paul expands upon this in the Epistle: *...that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God (vv. 17b-19).*

Whereas the three dimensions of the physical world occupy the attention of those who know nothing of anything else, the Christian is invited to begin to cross the threshold of a place unlimited by boundaries of any kind, *the love of Christ*. Because this love is eternal and infinite, even many steps into its midst can only be the barest of beginnings. An entire earthly lifetime of wholehearted devotion to the Lord could only be a mere, shadowy preview of much, much more.

And the goal?... *to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (v. 19). To “know something that surpasses knowledge”... implies a concept for which there are no adequate words, nor descriptions, nor previous frames of reference, nor any other precedent within human experience. This is profoundly humbling: to suggest to great minds that their power is limited, to the gifted imagination that there is a place to which it cannot be extended, that the combined talent and ability of even all men together can't get them there... Awaiting those who live by faith is *the measure of all the fullness of God*. Once again, we can imagine that even the inspired St. Paul has reached the end of any means of expression that would be adequate to the task of describing something for which our forms of communication are inadequate.

He closes with a famous “doxology”, a hymn of praise:

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (vv. 20, 21)

When one can no longer speak, one can at least sing. If my heart were so full that my emotions carried me far beyond the realm of speech, I could resort to song. But what do these words mean?

How can God exceed in His doing the limits of what we can *ask or think*? It must be because our faith is too small and our expectations are limited. Or is it because we don't dare to think too grandly? Are we afraid we'll be disappointed, or appear to be selfish? But perhaps it's through no fault of ours. Suppose it means that He picks up our small, broken prayers arising from the anguish of our hearts, uttered often in desperation and even unbelief, brushes them off, turns them around in His hand, and adds to them a whole dimension of grace and blessing which really reflected the very heart of what we had so imperfectly requested?

We asked for church unity, and He gave us two millennia of strife, division, and turmoil, in order that we might be prepared for a unity that only He knows anything about. We asked for churches filled with souls, and successful campaigns of evangelism, and He gave us painful seasons of purification when our numbers dwindled to nothing, and churches were left empty, or demolished, in order that when the Wheat was really, truly harvested, the Tares [weeds] could accurately be identified and removed (see Matt. 13:24–30). We asked for glory in our land, and He gave us instead a terrible season of apostasy, immorality, and social decay, so that which

really, truly embodies the spirit of America might be tested and tried, leaving only that which is beautiful, sincere, and holy to remain.

And on the intensely personal level: I prayed for blessings on family and friends, and yet their afflictions seem to have increased instead. Is it that God has a destiny in mind for them that far exceeds my thoughts on their behalf, one that cannot be achieved by any other means? I hoped for plenty for myself, and success, and depth of character and wisdom, and godliness, and for stature in the sight of God and man. But there are a host of disappointments, apparent failures, and a life that seems covered with the debris of broken dreams. Can all of this really be the medium through which God will bring *exceeding abundance* above all that I asked?

All of this is not said to give the impression that God answers all of our prayers with disaster, or that the only way He will respond will be to apparently ignore our prayers on behalf of His own will.

But *faith* urges us always to look past the obvious --and to keep looking--, in order to perceive the truth behind every circumstance.

...to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (v. 21).

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.