

Sermon Epiphany Mystery I Julian Templeton
Ephesians 3:1-21 Epiphany 2015 St John's, New Barnet

In the Letter to the Ephesians Paul uses the word 'mystery' (μυστήριον) three times in the passage that was read to us. In everyday life we most likely encounter the word 'mystery' in a particular type of fiction, the *murder mystery*. The murder mystery, in one form or another, fills our television schedules. There is hardly an evening's viewing on any of the channels that does not include dark and dastardly deeds done in Oxford, Grantchester, Midsomer, or one of the metropolitan centres. There are whole sections devoted to murder mysteries in most bookshops called 'crime fiction'. The plot of most murder mysteries or crime fiction centers round a detective or sleuth who is called to investigate a mysterious premature death and attempts to piece together circumstances and motive to ascertain "whodunit". But in this genre the mystery is solved once the perpetrator of the murder has been identified and apprehended.

By contrast, the mystery of which Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians is about the attempt to comprehend what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This kind of mystery is never 'solved'; it is rather a matter of the more one investigates the more wonderful and amazing it is. In this kind of fathomless mystery it is not a matter of apprehending the perpetrator; rather, it is a matter being apprehended by Christ. Paul, who is identified as the writer of this letter, was first apprehended—we might even say ambushed—on the road to Damascus. Paul's epiphany came when he thought he was going to arrest some Christians; instead he was arrested by Christ. It was a forceful event. But the force that stopped Saul in his tracks and changed him into Paul was not the force of violence—even if it did cause him to fall to the ground—but the force of love. And

this is part of mystery of which Paul writes, and about which he is always amazed, that he, of all people, he who was intent on destroying the church, was apprehended by the living Christ, commissioned to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and shown abundant grace and love by God. Paul refers to himself consequently as "less than the least of all God's people" (Eph. 3:8). Christ appeared to Paul as pure grace, the purest epiphany, and revealed to him that his fanatical pursuit of the followers of Christ for the sake of some Pharisaic purity of the Jewish religion was completely misguided. Instead, to his complete surprise, Christ pursues Paul and completely turns him around. The implications of this are momentous. If Christ can change Paul, Christ can change anyone.

Because most of us have not been as fanatically opposed to Christianity as Paul was, Christ did not need to stop us in our tracks in quite so dramatic a way as Paul was stopped. But we too have had our epiphanies: revelatory moments when we have been overwhelmed by the nearness of God. Often we can't explain why God seems in that moment to be especially present, all we know is that we have been moved by something outside of ourselves, the working of which is mysterious.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, God's mysterious working is expressed first of all as cosmic reconciliation: ". . . the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, [will] be brought into a unity in Christ." (1:10). The working-out of that cosmic reconciliation is seen in God's bringing together two separated peoples: Jews and Gentiles. The Church is the coming-together of Jews and Gentiles to create a "single new humanity" (2:15) "through the cross by which he killed the enmity." (2:16).

When it comes to the matter of transforming enmity, of transforming hostility, antagonism and hatred, we begin to realise why the mystery of the gospel is so much more interesting, more important, more profound, and more transformative than any murder mystery devised by the human imagination. In your typical murder mystery, the detective or sleuth brings together the evidence to build a case for convicting the accused of a murder that has already occurred. But what the detective or sleuth is altogether powerless to effect is to transform the enmity, hostility, antagonism, and hatred that motivated the murderer in the first place. This is precisely where the mystery of the gospel is most effective. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ has taken all our enmity and hostility on himself. In his death on the cross and resurrection, Christ offers us the power to transform enmity and hostility into peace and friendship with God and with one another. That power is the power of repentance, which is the power that alone can transform us.

In 2006 the Director General of President Thabo Mbeki's office, the Reverend Frank Chikane, received what was for him an unnerving telephone call. He had been called to ask if he would receive former South African cabinet minister Adriaan Vlok to visit him. Frank Chikane was uneasy about this because he believed that it was this same former Minister of Law and Order who was responsible for an attempt to kill Mr Chikane in an incident in which his clothes and baggage were impregnated with poison while travelling in the US in May 1989. The former minister of law and order had previously admitted responsibility for blowing up the offices of the South African Council of Churches but received an amnesty for the incident. Mr Chikane headed the South African Council of Churches (SACC) when it was one of apartheid's fiercest critics. So it was with much trepidation that Frank Chikane

agreed to the visit. The day arrived and Adriaan Vlok was ushered into the Reverend Chikane's office. Mr Vlok said he wanted to express his sorrow at what he had done while Minister of Law and Order, and as an act of contrition he asked to wash Frank Chikane's feet. With surprise and reluctance, Frank Chikane agreed. A bowl and towel was brought and the white former cabinet minister got down on his knees on the floor and removed the shoes and socks of the black pastor. He then proceeded to wash his feet and dry them with the towel. Later Mr Vlok said that he did this in imitation of Christ and as an act of atonement.

This remarkable action is, to me, a far more interesting example of mystery than anything PD James or Ian Rankin has ever imagined, for it is a real example of someone who has changed from being perpetrator to penitent; someone who has exchanged the role of master for that of a servant. What at the time seemed so mysterious and inexplicable to the secular commentators was why? Why would a former Cabinet Minister effectively admit his guilt and attempt to atone for his actions?

But what seems so mysterious and inexplicable to the world would not have been so for Paul. Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians of an epiphany, of a revelation by the light of which his understanding has been transformed. This is the good news of the crucified and risen Christ, by which “. . . the wisdom of God in its infinite variety” is being “made known to the rulers and authorities [even] in the heavenly realms.” (3:10). The mystery that is being progressively revealed is that God the Father, he “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (3:15) will

...grant you inward strength and power through his Spirit, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundation may you, in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ' love, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you be filled with the very fullness of God. 3:16-19

Here Paul expresses the mystery of the gospel at its most expansive: we can never encompass or fully comprehend the immensity and extent of God's love revealed in Christ. Its breadth and length and height and depth are beyond knowledge. But what we can do is open ourselves, by a deliberate act of faith and trust, to be encompassed and indwelled by the mystery that is Christ's love. It is like being on a small boat in the middle of large ocean on a very hot day. The sun is beating down on you, and what you most want is to cool down, and the best way to cool down is to get into the water. But as you are so far out, you know that the water is deep. Do you risk sinking or being swept away? You have a choice: you can stay on the boat and become hotter and more bothered, or you can launch out into the cool blue water. You decide to take the plunge and immediately feel the cool salt water around you, holding you up. Often in life we feel that we must keep holding on tight to particular things or ideas if we are to survive. But the mystery and the demand of faith is realised by letting God hold us with his all-encompassing love in Christ.

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

3:20-21