

Ephesians 1: 3-14

The last time I was a full-time vicar and responsible for a large parish was in Liverpool. Liverpool is a large city, famous for having one of the largest dock areas in the United Kingdom. Another important aspect of the town is the two football clubs, Everton and Liverpool. I lived very near to both stadiums, but I rarely went there as it was very expensive. On 29 May 1985 Liverpool was playing Juventus in the Heysel Stadium in Brussels. But before the game began the Liverpool fans attacked the Juventus fans, who were pressed against a wall in the stadium before the start of the 1985 European Cup Final. That was the dark side, not simply of the fans but of the city itself. There were parts of Liverpool that were very dangerous.

Just one example. A couple who had just had a baby came to our church. Their grandma attended our church and they lived about 8 miles away on a council housing estate called Croxteth, better known as Crocky. So, when they rang up for an appointment, we quickly decided that I would come round the next afternoon. They were on the third floor of a long line of houses. As I was welcomed in I sat down on the settee. Immediately the wife said "Don't sit there". Why, I asked. "Oh, some kids were mucking about with our car so my husband went downstairs to tell them off. They shouted back at him and then, that night, they threw a brick through the window and just missed our baby." Fortunately, they soon managed to find a better place.

Now, if you are still awake, you will be thinking, what has this to do with the sermon for today? Well, the second reading is from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The main feature of what we have heard is about the relationship between God and all the people that on earth do dwell. We are not going to start debating some interesting theories that have no relevance to the way we live and think. Rather, we should begin a relationship that gives us an understanding of God and ourselves. The reading from Ephesians 1:3-14 is a good example of how the Christians in Ephesus were a group of pioneers, from whom we can learn.

We begin by affirming our belief in the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. Here we declare that our origin is no chance phenomena. It is not blind fate that allowed us to crawl out of the primordial soup, but a benevolent God. It is not the raw savagery of the survival of the fittest that has shaped this planet. There has been a creative power at work behind such processes. The creator saw fit to make us and, in doing so, longed for a relationship with each of us. And so, we were created in God's image endowed with wisdom, righteousness and holiness, but we chose to opt out of this relationship. Humankind desired independence rather than the dependence on a relationship with God. We rebelled against our father in heaven. As a result, the divine gifts were lost, the image was lost and we became a foreigner to God, ignorant, unrighteous, impotent and faced with death and judgement. This position of sinfulness, Adam transmitted to all his descendants. None of us can plead in self-excuse that we are ignorant of God's standards for each of us knows of our duty to God and how God has taught us what is right and wrong. But pride can lead us to the humiliating exercise of being unwilling to accept the mistakes we have made. Such behaviour should not be true of us. We gain

nothing if we readily admit to some minor faults but do not have the courage to admit our real mistakes.

Secondly, God's willingness to accept us is a ground for humility and not a ground for boasting. Some people seem to think that to believe oneself one of God's chosen people is about the most arrogant thought anybody could entertain. Well, that would be the case if we thought that God had chosen us because of some merit of ours. The reason why God chose us is not because of any great skill we possess, but because God wishes us to join with him in reaching out to others. Its practical consequences should always be that we live, on the one hand, holy and blameless before God (verse 4) and, on the other, to the praise of God's glorious grace (verse 6).

Thirdly, God destined us in love to be God's sons and daughters. God adopts us. This has important consequences. As the great Protestant of the 16th century John Calvin put it, Jesus fashioned himself in a body from our body, bones from our bones, that he might be the same as ourselves. What was proper to us, he willed to belong to himself, so that what was proper to himself might be given to us and that might be both a son like those around him and the son of God in common with us.

So, everything we have and are in Christ both comes from God and returns to God. It begins in his will and ends in his glory. For this is where everything begins and ends. But such a vision comes into violent collision with the human-centredness and self-centredness of the world. Fallen human beings, imprisoned in their own little egos, have an almost boundless confidence in the power of their own will and an almost insatiable appetite for the praise of their own glory. The people of God, however, have at least begun to be turned inside out. The new society has new values and new ideals. For God's people are God's possessions who live by God's will and for God's glory.