

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: Ephesians 3:14-21

Theme: “*God strengthens his people*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The desire to do good things is a wonderful attribute. If this desire is then combined with the skills and ability, then you have the complete package. We, of course, are rarely that package. Many times we would like to do good but we can't. At other times we could do something but we don't because it's not convenient, or we are afraid of the consequences, or any other excuse or reason. In today's New Testament reading, Paul recognises that God is willing and able to do good *for us*. In particular Paul is praying for God to strengthen the one holy Christian church.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

We need God to strengthen us

God's willingness and ability to act are clearly indicated throughout scripture. As John writes in Revelation, “You created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev 4:11). Not only does God create, he also wills things to be re-created. God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). But not only is God willing, he also has the ability to do as he desires. We hear in Hebrews, “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him” (Heb 7:25). Luke sums up God's absolute ability to save and strengthen, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk 1:37).

For all these good examples, nothing in scripture is more clear and emphatic about God's willingness and ability to help us than in today's text. Paul says that God's love ‘surpasses knowledge’ (v19) – that's God's willingness to strengthen us. And then in verse 20 Paul says that God “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think”. This is God's ability to do what he says and he desires. God is both willing and able to strengthen his church, and of course what this really means is that God is willing and able to strengthen us, the living stones of his church.

As much as we might want to be strong and capable and able to stand on our own, the truth is we need God's willingness and ability to strengthen us. Whilst the rest of Australia is in the middle of winter, here in the far north we are in the middle of the dry season. As we look around the hills we see everything drying out. Added to this was Friday's temperature of 29.9°C. With little moisture to sustain them, the plants quickly wilt as the heat bears down. Grass dries out further and things soon look dead.

We might easily imagine the world applying heat to our spiritual lives. How quickly do we wilt as the heat comes on. We might be weighed down as the good things we try to do become overtaken with the burden of our sins. As we try to grow our own faith, we have no strength to straighten up in righteousness. In our confirmation classes we talk about the work of the Holy Spirit who brings the life giving water to a house that is connected to the mains water supply. This is an analogy for baptism. We are connected to the saving grace of God through our baptism which joins us to Jesus. Even though we are always connected, sometimes we turn off the water supply to the house and we try to bring in our own water. Before long our efforts don't amount to much and everything quickly dries out and is in danger of dying.

As we struggle against the heat of the world, Paul is praying that you may be “strengthened with power through God's Spirit in your inner being” (v16). Even though this is Paul's prayer in which we join, it doesn't always feel as though we are being strengthened. Even though we may feel wilted and a little jaded, God remains willing and able to nourish us. Isaiah promises us, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice” (Is 42:3). Against a world which so often seems to want to suck the moisture, the very life of us out of us, we find love and life that cannot be measured in the water of life that is Jesus Christ.

The Triune God – our source of strength and life

Paul's example of prayer turns us back to the Triune God as our source of strength and life. God the Father is willing and able to strengthen you because he created you and gave you life. In the psalms and the prophets we hear on numerous occasions that God formed his people and he knew them, even before they were

conceived (Jer 1:5). In our text Paul reminds us that it is from our Heavenly Father that we are named. We are created for relationship with God, we are created in his image.

God the Son is willing and able to strengthen you for he dwells inside your hearts (v17). Jesus lives inside of you through the faith that is poured into you as you were baptised. Again we can use the analogy of the house that is connected to the water mains. The salvation that was won by Jesus on the cross in Jerusalem around 2,000 years ago comes to us, we don't come to Jesus. He is poured into our hearts. When we receive Holy Communion, our hearts are sprinkled with Jesus' blood and are cleansed because of what he has done for us. We are not powerless against the dryness of the world but are strengthened by Christ for the work that is ahead of us.

God the Holy Spirit is willing and able to strengthen you by delivering the salvation that Jesus won on the cross. It is the work of the Spirit to bring to each one of us individually the saving grace that God gives us so we can be right with him. The Pentecost theme of Christian growth is the result of the Spirit of God whom empowers those who put their trust in him alone. Even though Jesus died in Jerusalem all those years ago, it is as real for each one of God's children because this reality comes to us through baptism.

The work of the Triune God is to strengthen your faith towards the gift of eternal life. You were created and are sustained by God. You are saved by Jesus' death on the cross. You are called and gathered as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is most certainly true.

God renews and strengthens his church

You are the living stones of God's eternal church. Long after this church building has fallen down and the new sound system has been replaced, you will remain a part of God's church. All the beauty and majesty of the great cathedrals of Europe will be hollow shells or tourist draw cards, but you will remain as an enduring witness to God's grace and mercy. Friends, we strengthen and build, and repaint, and update the buildings that we use. And as we do so, we pray that our work might glorify God. But whilst we work on the physical buildings, God is working on building, equipping and strengthening his church which is you.

If this is hard to get your mind around, don't worry, you're in good company. So difficult is it to grasp, Paul prays that we remain "grounded in love so we may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge" (v17-19). The irony in Paul's prayer is that he wants us to comprehend (or understand) something that is beyond all knowledge (or understanding). Either Paul is playing games with us, or what we are understanding goes beyond reason and comes to us through faith alone. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). Armed with a childlike faith we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul concludes his prayer for spiritual strength with an amazing confession of faith. In our prayers, we are so often quick to tell God what the solution is to our problems. So often our prayers are framed as a 'to do' list for God to action, and the sooner the better. But Paul reminds us that God "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us" (v20). Two things here: 1) we think small, but God is able to think much bigger than we could imagine; and 2) the extraordinary thing is that God is working 'according to the power at work within us'. So God draws us in to his plan for doing great things. You are God's agents of peace and grace in the world today.

For this reason you may be confident that our church and our congregation will give glory to God, "in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."