

Ephesians 3:1-13 – ‘The Mystery’ (full sermon) NB Other reading Luke 2:21-35

INTRO Next part of Ephesians – just how amazing Jesus is, and what he offers to those who follow him. Learned that:

- We’ve got every spiritual blessing
- God offers us hope, riches and power – not necessarily in the way the world offers them, but riches of his blessing for all eternity
- Then – how in Jesus God saves us from everything that separates us from him – GRACE – getting what we don’t deserve – God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense
- Last week – how both Jews and non-Jews can all be part of God’s people

Picks up on that again this week...

Who likes mysteries? E.g. detective – Midsomer Murders or Death in Paradise? Or harder edged Scandinavian The Killing or The Bridge?

Or maybe puzzles & riddles, or cryptic crossword.

Mystery – v4 ‘Mystery of Christ’ – what is mystery? READ v6

It’s what Paul talked about in ch2: we can all be part of God’s family, we can all share in God’s blessings through Jesus – good news!

Why old Simeon got so excited in our gospel reading... (EXPAND)

Paul also talks candidly of his role in this mystery: READ v8-9a – very clear on it, and so committed that went for it even in face of suffering (v1 prisoner, v13 suffering)

Back to v22 – BODY – READ – PICK UP ON LAST WEEK: where does your brick fit? Is there a gap in the wall where your brick is meant to be?

Keep thinking! (I’m going to keep coming back to this.)

But where I want to focus this week is to go back to face a difficult question: READ v5. **Why did God not reveal it before?** Bible says that Jesus came at ‘just the right time’ – but it is a difficult question.

Lots of tricky questions – what’s your mystery? What’s the one question you’d like to ask God? (DISCUSS - FLIPCHART)

Wanted to pick up on this verse – difficult questions. Appropriate after the controversy this week surrounding Stephen Fry’s comments. Interview on Irish TV with Gay Byrne, and was asked this question: "You walk up to the pearly gates and you are confronted by God, what would Stephen Fry say to him, her or it?" Extraordinary angry outburst – SF’s difficult question:

"I will say bone cancer in children, what's that about?," he says. "How dare you, how dare you create a world that has such misery that is not our fault. It is not right. It is utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is full of injustice and pain?" And so it goes on.

Big question – why? Why evil, why suffering, and so why should I worship you?

Derails faith of so many people – deserves an answer. Never a perfect answer: why ultimately we live by faith. But here's 3 responses I would give to Mr Fry:

1. Alternative is no better – let's take the alternative view i.e. Atheism – atheism has no response to the outrage you feel. If we live in a randomly generated universe with no overall creator, no design – then there's no-one to be angry at. Even Richard Dawkins admits this:

"In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."

You can see what he's saying can't you? It's entirely logical. Dawkins helpfully articulates what happens if you take God out of your view of the world. In a godless universe we lose any concept of ultimate justice, good or evil. All you can say to the problem of suffering is: "Tough luck. Bad things happen. Deal with it."

In fact, Fry's clear anger and moral outrage hints at the second thing I want to say, something CS Lewis talked about a lot:

2. You might be closer to the Christian faith than you realise.

The point is, why does he feel any sense of justice at all? Where does that come from? CS Lewis was probably the most famous Christian thinker of the 20th century and he was himself an atheist as a young man. But one of the things that turned him towards faith was precisely this problem, which he describes in his classic book Mere Christianity:

"My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?In the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple."

Being angry with someone doesn't prove they don't exist, but rather that they do. Like the Prodigal son in Jesus' famous parable. When he runs off with his inheritance to a distant land and lives as if his father was dead, it doesn't mean he was dead. He was always alive.

We are angry with God precisely because there is something in the core of our being which cries out for him to exist. And God put it there. It's what CS Lewis calls the 'God-shaped hole'. It's what the writer of Ecclesiastes means when he says that God 'has put eternity in the hearts of human beings'. Selfish genes cannot evolve the sense of justice and care for the vulnerable that we see built into our human natures. Hate is often *love, hurting*.

3. You're rejecting a flawed view of God's relationship to the world. There's a mystery here about how much freedom God gives us. Part of Fry's problem is that he sees God as causing all of this stuff, that somehow the world is working as God intended it should. But that is completely wrong – it's not how God set the world up. He gave us freedom to make our own choices, and consequence is that the world is not as it should be, or how God intends it to be. To quote Krish Kandiah's excellent article in response this week: "To blame God for natural disasters and childhood cancer is like blaming the landlord after tenants have trashed their house." *

God is a landlord who gives his tenants freedom, not a housemaster of boarding school with absolute power over the boarders. In fact he came as a tenant to show how the other tenants should live and clean up all the mess in the kitchen – and the other tenants threw him out. And one day he will rip up the contract and turn the house back to being as it should be, and live there with all the tenants in a beautiful show home (if you'll allow me to stretch the analogy). But for now the tenants can still trash the house.

In the end, what sort of God do we want to worship? One who gives us freedom even if the risk is that we abuse it? Or one who controls us, a tyrannical housemaster? Because the thing is, God is absolutely consistent – if he steps in to stop the big stuff, he has to stop the small stuff too. We always draw lines that God doesn't. We want him to stop all the bad people 'out there', but conveniently ignore the bad stuff nearer to home. God is more just than we are? He is also more loving, more merciful. He even experienced suffering himself, he is not immune to it, he understands and brings us through it.

So don't let go of your questions. Keep asking them. The very fact that you can ask them shows that God is not a tyrant, but a loving father who allows you to question him. If he was the sort of monster that Fry makes him out to be, he would have smited him straight away, wouldn't he? Instead Mr Fry lives with wealth, success and freedom.

The great commentator on the book of Psalms Walter Brueggemann was once asked how he imagined typical writer of a Psalm. And he said that he imagined a little old Jewish man, shaking his fist at God. Isn't it extraordinary that God allows us to question him, to shake our fists and pray those angry prayers in the psalms? Life hurts – but God is bigger than our hurts, and he will listen and respond to us as we pour out our hearts.

If only Stephen Fry knew that. Perhaps we need to know that too. Lent is almost here, a time often of the desert, of lament. Let's not be afraid to voice our hard questions: God is closer than you think.

* You can read the article in full here:

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/stephen.fry.says.god.is.capricious.mean.minded.stupid.but.lets.not.get.angry/47174.htm>