

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 14 MARCH 2021

This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation. There is no Sunday engagement (so we shall actually get to St Stephen's again for worship). I think understandably, I used the prayer from Brighton-le-Sands last Sunday for International Women's Day, which fell the day after the Brighton service, and just the day before the Tuesday service. You received that prayer last week. Sorry, that means no Prayers of the People are included in this edition. I invite you to pray your own prayers. There are more than enough things to bring before our listening God.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Gracious God,
You are a just God.
You reject injustice, and champion the vulnerable.
Your prophets cry out for the oppressed,
and you humble those who victimise their fellow men and women.
You are on the side of the poor.
You champion the victims of unfairness and injustice.
You call your creation to a life of integrity,
fairness and justice;
you demand that we give up our selfish ways,
and share the wealth with which you have endowed us,
that all may live lives of dignity and plenty.
Give us ears to hear your call,
and hearts to respond,
for we would be your people,
and we would be women and men of generosity, integrity, justice and fairness.
For you indeed are a just, compassionate and wise God;
Your generosity, integrity, justice and fairness
are perfect beacons that beckon us from our selfish ways.

So we ask your forgiveness for the many times we have fallen short.
Father, we know there have been times when we have been unfair,
when we have exploited those around us for our own gain,
when we have acted unjustly,
when we have failed to share our wealth with those in need,
when we have lacked integrity.
Forgive us, we pray.
And forgive also our complicity in the sins of our society.
We ruthlessly demand cheap goods,
and give little thought to the exploitation of resources and workers
that makes them so cheap.

Our consumer society demands endless trinkets,
and we vicariously join in the over-exploitation of the earth's bounty
to satisfy our lust for more and more material things.
As share-holders, we demand immediate profits,
relegating long-term needs and the greater good to second place.
We stand by as our own and other wealthy societies
allow people to fall into poverty, homelessness and despair,
resenting the cost of the social welfare net that is needed
to address such crying needs,

and spurning the desperate need for our generosity internationally.
Yet we hide behind the excuse that there is nothing we can do;
it's all too hard; it's the problem of governments.
Forgive us, we pray,
and chasten our consciences to hear and respond to the cry for justice.
For it is Jesus' name that we ask this,
Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

The writer to the Ephesians wrote these words:
*... God, who is rich in mercy,
out of the great love with which he loved us
even when we were dead through our trespasses,
made us alive together with Christ ...*
Through the grace of God and the resurrection of Christ,
our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Reading** –
Ephesians 2:1-10

4 **Sermons:** See below

5 **The Lord's Prayer**

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

But God ...
Now is the time to return to your world,
to embrace the good works which God has prepared for you.
Go in the strength of the risen One,
for God has reached out to you in his mercy.
The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the companionship of the Holy Spirit,
be with you,
and abide with you always.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

I was always taught that you shouldn't start a sentence with 'but'. Now when we speak, we do tend to break rules that we stick to when we write; and so, when I write a sermon, I often do use "but" to start a new sentence. It just seems stronger, and a bit less clumsy, than "however", or "nevertheless". It emphasises the contrast you're trying to make more starkly.

When I'm writing more formally, though, I hesitate to start a sentence with "but".

In our passage from the letter to the Ephesians, however, the translators of a number of versions decided to start verse 4 with the word "But". You can chalk up *The New English Bible*, *The Good News Bible*, *The New International Version (NIV)* – that's the one in the pews – *The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*, and even the JB Phillips translation, in that camp. Even the very formal King James Authorised version broke that cardinal rule of English, and started its translation of verse 4 with "But".

The fault – if indeed it is a fault to start a sentence with "but" – doesn't go back to the original writer. The letter to the church in Ephesus may have been written by Paul, but more probably by someone in Paul's immediate circle. Whoever actually wrote it, though, in the Greek text, the first seven verses of our passage are one very long sentence! You can do that in inflected languages; long sentences don't end up in the muddle that they tend to in English. Even so, in that long sentence, there's still a very distinct pivot point marked out by the word "but".

Now, by this stage, you could be forgiven for wondering why I'm making such a fuss about such an apparently trivial matter. Does anyone actually care about this kind of stuff? It's true: I am a pedant when it comes to language, but I've already admitted that I break this particular rule in some circumstances. The fact is that I'm not actually concerned about the language at all.

The reason I draw attention to this pivotal word "but" is because it's the harbinger of good news; in fact it takes the reader straight to the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The sentence in translation actually begins, "But God"

"But God" I'm going to suggest to you that those are the most beautiful and powerful of words.

The purpose of the letter to the Ephesians is unclear and highly debated. So it's not quite clear what issue, if any, the author was addressing; but the result is an all-round statement of the Pauline view on a whole lot of matters. Chapter 1 makes a strong statement about the person and the significance of Christ, as well as offering a prayer for the readers of the letter. Then in chapter 2, the writer tells us *why* the saving work of Jesus Christ was necessary.

You were dead, the writer tells his readers, through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

"Dead". "You were *dead*," says the writer. Of course, in one sense, the word "dead" is a metaphor; but in another sense, it's absolutely true. The way of life that is described in this passage is not one that leads to life, but one that saps the life out of us. In Romans, Paul had written, "The wages of sin is death." What is described in Ephesians is a way of life that is beholden to selfish worldly desires.

Now we may have trouble relating to the words that are used in the letter. They certainly have strong overtones of sensual desires, and perhaps the writer was, indeed, thinking of sexual promiscuity. Probably most of us, if we are in faithful, loving relationships, wouldn't see ourselves

caught by that kind of description. But a selfish fixation on satisfying our worldly desires goes far and beyond things sexual. It's our worship of ourselves, and our urge to meet our own passions and desires, that lead us to get the world all out of perspective; to place ourselves and our wants at the centre of all things, and to demand that the rest of the world go into orbit around us.

And so the "passions of the flesh" will be different for each of us – for some it *will* be basic sensual satisfaction – sex, exotic foods, comfort and luxury; for *others* it will be wealth and possessions and all the paraphernalia of our material world; for others it will be our career, or power, or success, or our sense of importance; for others again, it will be our car, or our hobby, or our politics, or our sport. There is an endless list, and it doesn't leave out too many of us. If we're frank with ourselves, for most of us at least, there are things to which we devote ourselves which are, in the end, mostly about pleasing ourselves, and satisfying our deep-seated and powerful worldly desires. "You were dead," the writer to the Ephesians tells us. A life devoted to the satisfaction of self, to worldly desires, is *dead*. It is, in fact, no life at all. It is the way of death. *The wages of sin is death*.

That is how you once lived, the writer tells his readers. You were once caught in the thrall of sin, imprisoned by its imperatives, and ensnared in its deathly spiral. You were once in a state of helplessness and hopelessness.

And then comes the pivot point in that incredibly long Greek sentence. Then comes the place at which successive translators were moved to break the rules of English grammar to make such a significant point. Then come those wonderful, life-giving words, *But God*

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ

One commentator on this passage recalled that verses 8-9 were his confirmation verses; he'd had to memorise them as a teenager seeking confirmation, and many years later, he still remembers them. They were a two verse summary of the good news of the gospel; and indeed this whole passage of ten verses is a wonderful statement of the gospel.

Yet if someone asked me to sum up the gospel even more briefly, I think this passage would give me the words I needed: *But God* Had it not been for God, there was, and could not be, any hope for us. "But God"

Those two verses the commentator had to learn for his confirmation are a great follow up, though.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

You can see why it was such a great confirmation passage. It's probably the most succinct summary of the gospel proclaimed by Paul that you'll find anywhere.

There is nothing we can ever do to *earn* our salvation; none of us can have any cause to "boast" that *we* have achieved our redemption. That is a gift of grace, granted by a loving God, to all who will simply believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we were mired in our sinfulness, and helpless to extricate ourselves from its deathly spiral, God reached out to us in love and mercy and grace. That is the gospel – simple, beautiful and life-giving.

And our lives are to respond to God's inexplicably generous gift:

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

We are called to “good works”. Not because any works we can do can earn us points of the credit side of the salvation ledger; that’s not the point, and the passage has just made that very clear. Good works are what we were created to do. That’s why a self-serving and self-aggrandising way of living leads to death – because it’s contrary to the true nature embedded deeply with in. We were not created to live that way. Salvation in Christ re-forms us, to be the people we were supposed to be. That is God’s promise, and it’s the promise of true life; life lived to the fullness of its divine purpose.

Do you recall being told, as a child, or as an adult even, “No if’s or but’s!”? It’s telling us that we can’t set conditions, and try to wriggle our way out of something. We give thanks that our God places no “if’s” on our salvation; salvation is a gift from “the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses”. It is unconditional love. No “if’s” about it.

But thanks be to God for those wonderful words “But God” I’ll take that “but” any day. It is the most transformative, wonderful, life-giving word. No “if’s” but an almighty “but”.

“But God”

In those two words are the hope of the world.

Amen