

The Gospel-Centred Church

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0:00] Friends, while you remain standing, I'll pray. Father, we pray today that you would help us, that we might hear your word truly and respond to it rightly. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, to Sherlock Holmes, she is always the woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes, she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex.

It is not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. No, all emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind.

He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world had ever seen. And yet there was one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler of dubious and questionable memory.

Friends, this is, some of you will recognise it. If you don't recognise the names, there's something wrong, I think. This is the story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called A Scandal in Bohemia, and that's how it opens.

[1:17] And the writings of Doyle, of Edgar Allan Poe, of Herman Melville, of Wilkie Collins, they defined a genre over a period of time. And these are stories that we know of as mystery stories.

They're stories of shock and of awe, of explorations into the unknown, of investigations into hidden paths, journeys into dark places and dark people.

And so for 200 years now, such stories have defined for us the term mystery. A mystery is something written by a novelist.

It often involves detectives and police. We can see it now on the TV screen. I watch them regularly. It is something to be solved and a resolution to be reached. But let me tell you that the word mystery is not a new word.

It is an ancient word. And it is a word that has ancient connotations. And it is a word that the Apostle Paul particularly liked. And he used it in his own peculiar way.

[2:18] You see, the word mystery, the Greek word for mystery, is used 27 times in the New Testament. And 21 of them are from the pen of Paul.

And the place I want to concentrate to begin this morning is Ephesians 3. So I wonder if you can turn in that little outline that I've given you to Ephesians 3. And I'm just going to start at the first verse there.

So it's on the front page there for you. And I want you to listen carefully to what Paul says. He says this. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, on behalf of you Gentiles, you have heard, haven't you, about the administration of God's grace given to me for you.

The mystery was made known to me by revelation. As I've briefly written above. By reading this, you're able to understand my insight about the mystery of the Messiah.

This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed by his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. The Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, partners in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.

[3 : 31] Let me explain what Paul is saying here because when you listen properly, it is an astounding thing that he is saying. First, Paul says he has been chosen by God to administer a mystery.

And a mystery for Paul is something that had been hidden in the past in the mind of God but is now revealed. In other words, what Paul is saying is God at one time had a secret plan.

He had that plan from before the foundation of the world. It was hidden in the mind of God. Perhaps occasionally it might have been hinted at in Scripture but it was not generally made known to people in other generations.

But now, here in the first century, it has been revealed fully to Paul. It has been revealed by his Spirit to the apostles and prophets.

And what God has done is God has made Paul a custodian and administrator of this mystery, this secret now revealed.

[4 : 35] He has given Paul the task of putting the secret plan of God out into the public domain and making it available for the whole world.

This is an incredible thing that Paul is saying. Verse 4 tells us that this mystery is the mystery of the Messiah, of the Christ. And verse 6 tells us the content of that mystery.

The mystery revealed is this. Wait for it. The great mystery of the Messiah is that Gentiles are co-heirs.

Let me say it again. The great mystery of the Messiah is this, that Gentiles are co-heirs. Now friends, to you, that may sound trite because you are mostly Gentiles.

but it is revolutionary if you've read chapters 1 to 3 and if you've read your Old Testament. Gentiles, we are co-heirs, members of the same body as Jews, partners in the promise of the Messiah, Jesus.

[5 : 44] And this extraordinary inclusion has happened by one mechanism. It has happened through the gospel. And friends, I want to stress this. This is hard work understanding this concept but if you get it, it is revolutionary.

I need you to understand it is critical for Christian people. It is critical for our life together. God has had a secret plan that has been there from the beginning of time and before.

That secret plan is that all humanity will be reconciled to Him. Jews, Gentiles will be partners in salvation.

Jews and Gentiles will be bound together in one new humanity. And the centre of this plan is Jesus. It is a plan, says Paul, in Christ Jesus.

And the means for this plan being realised is the gospel. The gospel concerning Christ is the key to unlock God's secret plan for all eternity.

[6 : 50] It is that Gentiles, we Gentiles, are co-heirs, members of the same body, partners in the promise. And in the language of chapter 2, verse 15, there is now one new humanity.

And this has happened in Christ Jesus through the gospel. and this is the key to all that Paul says in chapters 1 to 3.

And this lies, that's the foundation of what he's going to say in chapter 4. Let me say, there's a great mistake I think with people in chapter 4 and even the commentators I've read this week get it wrong. That is, they recognise that there's some key between, there's some link between chapters 1 to 3 and 4, but they treat chapter 4 on its own.

If you treat chapter 4 on its own, you will miss what it has to say. So let's have a look at it. I want you to notice the very first thing that Paul says. Have a look at chapter 4. He starts with the word therefore.

Now I don't need to tell you, but I will, that the word therefore usually means given what I've said beforehand, I'm about to say something now that will flow from it. That is exactly what is going on here.

[7 : 54] The therefore refers back to all he has said beforehand. It refers back to the whole three chapters. He's saying, in the light of what I spent my time explaining to you over three chapters, in the light of God's great plan, that I have outlined for you and my administration of it, I, Paul, the prisoner of the Lord, urged you to walk worthy of the calling you have received.

What is that calling, do you reckon? Well, that calling is the calling to be Christian, to be God's one new humanity. It is a calling to be members of God's new humanity forged out of Jews and Gentiles.

He says, walk worthy of that calling. And the unity that we have is mapped out in verses four, three to six. Have a look at it. It's a unity that Paul outlines using the divine number of characteristics.

Seven of them. Count them. You can see them all there. And it is not only that, it is a unity that involves the whole of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a unity where Jew and Gentile are bound together in one body, where there is one spirit, one hope to which they were called, one Lord, Jesus, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.

I mean, you can't get much more comprehensive than that, can you? The divine number, the Trinity, and then one God, the Father, who is above all and through all and in all.

[9 : 28] Can you see what Paul is saying? He's saying, this secret plan now revealed has been physically launched by God in time and space. God's new humanity has a time and space pilot program that God is running and it is you, the church.

For there, in the church, there are people from every nation, every background, every tongue. They are bound together in a Trinitarian unity that rises above any differences that were there beforehand in religion, nationality, background, age, sex, culture.

God's eternity, God's eternal plan has invaded the earth in his pilot program and in the church, God is parading his final goal for creation.

All humans bound together by him into one, tied together by the peace that has been won in Christ Jesus through the gospel. This end time outpost, this pilot project is God's means for making God's multifaceted wisdom known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Friends, look back at Ephesians 3, verse 10. See what it says. Paul is saying that through the church God's multifaceted wisdom is being paraded before the heavenly powers and authorities.

[11 : 00] With this in mind I want you to notice something. Look again at verses 1 to 6 in Ephesians 4. Paul acknowledges that the church is a unity in its calling. It is one church.

It is one faith. It is one baptism. It is one Lord. It is one Father. It is one Spirit. Paul acknowledges the church is a unity in its calling.

However, he also says that that unity has to be maintained. That is, it has to be worked at. It requires God's people to walk as he said in a manner worthy of the calling they have received.

They are one in Christ. They need to walk as though they are. It requires that this God's church works at keeping unity. Now, what's it going to require to keep unity between people like you and me and you and each other?

What's it going to require to do that? Well, I tell you what, it's going to require a lot of humility, isn't it? A lot of gentleness, a lot of patience, a lot of acceptance, which is what the very words that Paul uses here.

[12 : 07] Friends, this is a word from God. Hear it. Hear we at Holy Trinity are a snapshot of God's eternal purposes in his world. Hard to believe, isn't it? But it is true.

We are a snapshot of God's eternal purposes in his world. We are representatives together of God's new humanity. In us, God is demonstrating what the gospel about his son can do.

Friends, this is not some sort of divine multiculturalism. No, in fact, if I were to put it another way, it is God's divine monoculturalism. You see, the gospel concerning Jesus Christ has forged us amazingly into a monoculture that overrides all of our differences.

And as God's gospel-centered church, God's gospel-centered people, God's gospel-centered new humanity, we have more in common with each other than our differences.

And we need to work hard, therefore, at our unity in Christ. We need to actively choose to walk in a manner worthy of this incredibly great calling which we have received from God.

[13 : 22] Friends, as I look around today, we have come from many different backgrounds, haven't we? We differ in age, in sex, in nationality, in colour of our skin, in background, in education, in a whole host of different ways.

And in the days ahead for us as a congregation, we will undoubtedly have differences of opinion to add to that. But we must not allow these things to overthrow the essential unity we have in Christ through the gospel.

Let us decide that we will work diligently at what already binds us together. We are God's Christ-centered people. We are God's gospel-centered church.

In every thought, every decision, every word, every action, let us give priority to Jesus. King and we work together on that which binds us together.

God will proclaim to Doncaster the world and let me tell you, even the heavenly powers themselves, his multifaceted wisdom.

[14 : 38] Do you ever think of what we do here on Sunday morning like that? That the heavenly powers are seeing God's multifaceted wisdom as we, the people of God, united together by the gospel, meet and go about God's work.

With that said, let's have a look at the next part of our passage. Look at Ephesians 4. And verses 1 to 6 have stressed our unity. They've urged us to keep on maintaining the unity of the Spirit.

But verses 7 to 11 are quite different in their thrust. You see, they emphasize our diversity. You see, friends, although we are one in Christ, although we are bound together to Him in the gospel, although there's one body, one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, we must not forget that the all of us are incredibly diverse.

And this diversity also comes from God. Just as He made us one, so He made us diverse. Look at verse 7. He's focused on the big picture of our unity.

Now He concentrates on what He says is each one of us. So on the minutia, on us, on me, on you. And He tells us that God has given grace to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift.

[16 : 02] He's given all of us gifts. And to support this contention, He uses a quotation from Psalm 68. There's lots of debate about what He does with it. But I think, and it's not now the time to look at that, I want to tell you what I think is going on in the big picture.

First, did you notice that in these passages, in this passage, Paul talks about Jesus descending? Well, I think that simply means He came to earth in the incarnation.

He descended from heaven. He became a human being. Second, he talks about Jesus ascending. You see, after His death, we know, don't we, that after three days He rose.

God raised Him from the dead. Then God, we're told in Ephesians, seated Him in the heavenly places. That is, He ascended. He ascended from earth, in fact, into the highest heaven.

And He took the place of highest supremacy, sitting at the right hand of God. And He exercised God's sovereign rule over all spiritual and physical powers.

[17 : 07] He exercised His lordship over all creation. And third thing to notice is that from this position of power and rule, given to Him by God, Jesus gave gifts to His church.

And He distributed gifts to the members of His body, the church. Friends, these verses are clear. Jesus descended to earth, became a human being.

He ascended to heaven as sovereign ruler. He gave gifts to His church. And with that in mind, let's focus on the gifts that are specifically mentioned here. Can you see them there, verse 11? I think these gifts are probably foundational gifts.

They're not the only gifts we know from other parts of the New Testament. Lots of other gifts are spoken about. But these ones are peculiar in many ways. They are foundational. It looks as though they are the gifts that set the boundary and the scope for all other gifts.

Let me explain. Look at verse 11. Paul lists four or perhaps five gifts. Jesus Christ gave, some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, teachers and teachers.

[18 : 19] Now, there's lots of debate about this verse as well. The whole chapter is full of debate, in fact. But I think the general thrust is clear. Apostles and prophets. Who do you reckon that refers to?

Probably the same people that are referred to back in chapter 2, verse 20, and chapter 3, verse 5. That is, the ones who first heard about Jesus, met Jesus, and proclaimed Jesus.

I think that's probably who the apostles and prophets are. And then what about the evangelists, the pastors, the teachers? Who do you think they are? Well, I suspect they're the church workers who took those truths from the apostles and prophets and explained them, proclaimed them, taught the ramifications of them.

They were the evangelists, pastors, teachers. Because of the way the original, because of the way the original language is constructed, some people think pastors and teachers are one gift. So a pastor teacher.

The others think, no, no, they're two gifts that sort of overlap together. Lately, I've begun to think the second alternative is right, but it doesn't matter too much.

[19 : 21] What does matter is, did you notice the similarity between all five or four, depending on how you count them? Did you notice the similarity? They are all designed to speak about what God has done in Christ, aren't they?

That is what apostles do, prophets do, evangelists do, pastor, teachers do. That's what they do. They tell you, here's what Jesus has done. Here are the implications for you. Some speak in order to reveal God's great mystery in Christ through the gospel.

Some speak to persuade people to become Christians. Some speak to nurture Christians in their faith, but all speak to teach people what the faith of Christ is all about.

All speak. All speak of Jesus. All speak of God's great mystery in Christ Jesus through the gospel. These foundational gifts have a common element.

They are speaking gifts. Friends, I want to tell you, arising out of this passage is why I came to Holy Trinity, Doncaster. I came to be your pastor teacher because before I came, you had a reputation.

[20 : 32] And it was a reputation. I thought it was a good reputation. I mean, lots of churches have reputations aren't so good, but this, this one was a good one. And what was it? You had a reputation for being a church that loves hearing the word of God explained.

That's a great reputation to have. And I know that many of you love hearing God's word explained because you know that the, that our life and witness as God's people in God's world is founded on hearing God's word.

However, I want you to notice what Paul says here, because as laudable, this is loving to hear God's word. I want you to notice what Paul says. He focuses in on these speaking words.

He knows they're foundational. He knows that Jesus knows they're foundational, but they are not an end in themselves. Friends, hearing good Bible teaching is not an end in itself. It is a, it, it has a goal.

There is God's purpose in giving his world word. And in verses 12 to 16, Paul tells us what that goal is. So let's have a look at it. This is 12 to 16.

[21 : 40] Lots of debate again, yet again here, but let me explain what I think Paul's saying. Verse 11, Jesus gives foundational speaking gifts. Verse 12, Paul says, he gives them for the training of the saints in the work of ministry.

So as to build up the body of Christ. Let me try and explain it in a sort of staircase manner. Here, Jesus gave speaking gifts. What for?

The training of the saints in the work of ministry. Why? To build up the body of Christ. Can you see what's going on? Jesus gave these gifts for the training of the saints in the work of ministry to build up the body of Christ.

Paul is telling us that ministers of God's word are given by Christ. They're given, excuse me, to equip believers to exercise their own gifts in Christ's service.

And through this, God's goal is accomplished. And in verse 13, Paul tells us what the goal is. Can you see it there? Verse 13, God's goal for his church is unity, unity and maturity.

[22 : 58] You can see it, can't you? Christ gave these gifts to equip all God's people so that they could exercise their own gifts. And the exercise of their own gifts would be to build up the body of Christ.

That is the church. Until what? Until we all reach the unity and the faith and the knowledge of God's son. Until we all grow into the maturity that is measured by Christ's fullness.

Can you see what I'm saying? You see, I speak to you now as your pastor teacher. And as I'm speaking to you this morning, as I'm explaining God's word to you, God is doing a construction work.

You never think of it that way, do you? But that's what he's on about. As I speak God's word, he's doing a construction work. He is equipping you. He's equipping you for works of service.

He's equipping you for works of service so that this whole body of Christ here at Holy Trinity and throughout the world might be built up. And the final goal?

[24 : 01] Well, it's threefold. Unity in the faith and the knowledge of God's son. Growth to mature manhood. I think what that means is growth to be a mature one humanity, which is what we've been created as.

And thirdly, a maturity that is measured by Christ's fullness. That is what is happening when the word of God is explained and preached. That is what God is aiming at for us.

He wants us to be united in the faith and the knowledge of his son. He wants us to be this whole new humanity. He wants this maturity to be measured by the fullness of Christ himself.

And he wants us to be like the Jesus we worship. This is the positive way of putting the whole thing. Have a look at verses 14 to 16.

They're not so positive, if I could put it that way. Another way of putting it is that God doesn't want us to be little kids tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine.

[25 : 00] And that is someone comes along and they spout something new and we listen. We go with them. Someone else comes along, spouts something new and we listen and we go with them. And before long, we're just tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine.

That's not what God wants for us. On the contrary, he has provided teaching and supporting ligaments. By the way, I suspect that the ligaments, the supporting ligaments here are the same gifts as in chapter 11.

That is teachers and pastors and evangelists and apostles and prophets. He causes, he's provided teaching and supporting ligaments that cause us to be fitted and knit together.

By speaking the truth in love to each other, we will grow up into him who is the head, even Christ. And the body, therefore built together by in love, by the proper working of each individual part, will grow in maturity.

I wonder if I could just return for a moment. I have pushed you again. This has been three weeks of hard work, hasn't it? I've pushed you again, but it's important. I want to go back to the point I made earlier on.

[26 : 11] It is a good thing that we here at Holy Trinity love hearing the Bible taught. It is a very good thing. And it is good because that's where growth starts.

But friends, let me tell you, it's not where growth finishes. The goal of hearing the Bible taught is that we're reflected in the way that we live.

That is, the goal of hearing the Bible taught is that our lives are changed. It is that we ourselves are so changed that we begin speaking the word to each other, that we work together with God and with each other to grow the whole body together in Christ.

If you have come here as an individual, locked in your own little circle, not concerned to do anything for other people, you are mistaking why God has brought you here. God has brought you here, not so much to hear from me.

He might start with that, but so that what you hear from me, from God's word, might change your life with the person next to you, the person before you, the person behind you, and the person you'll meet in your small group this week, and the person that you'll encounter on the street who does not know Christ.

[27 : 27] The speaking gifts God gives to his church are not only me speaking, but you speaking, speaking to each other about God, speaking in love to each other, teaching one another, training one another, and doing so until we all attain to the unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, doing so until we all reflect that new humanity that God has made us through the gospel of his Son, doing so until that maturity is a full reflection of the fullness of Christ.

So friends, I have worked you hard. Let me remind you though where we've been these last few weeks. We have done hard work, and these sermons are far more doctrinal, far more heavy going than usual, and far less application, but I do want to make the point from them.

What did we do in our first week? Do you remember? We looked at Romans chapter 1, verses 1 to 6, and we saw that the centre of God's great purpose for his world is the gospel. God is a gospel-centred God.

Week 2, do you remember, we took a close look at Romans 1, 16 and 17, and we saw that the gospel is a message, and that message is about what he's done in Christ, and that message is his power to salvation for everyone who believes, whether they're Jew or Gentile.

Then week 3, we took a run through Ephesians 1 to 3, didn't we, the whole three chapters, and we saw that God's gospel-centred plan was formed from before the world began, a plan that had all humanity in mind, a plan that stretched to the very gates of heaven and hell.

[29 : 03] It was a plan that was cosmic in proportion and in execution. And we found that God's gospel-centred plan has a pilot project. And that pilot project is the church.

It is us. Through the church, through us, God is proclaiming his multifaceted wisdom to the heavenly places.

And that message, to be heard clearly, needs some work. God's people need to work hard on the unity they have in Christ. They need to listen hard to the speaking gifts God has given his church.

The speaking gifts are the ligaments that hold the body of Christ together, the church. But for the body of Christ to be built properly, it is not enough to just have teaching.

No. Each one of us must listen and then act. And then, we are to be engaged in the work of ministry ourselves.

[30 : 08] We are to be involved in the construction work that God is about. That is the building up of the body of Christ. We, ourselves, are critical for that.

We are to push together until we all reach the unity and the faith and the knowledge of God's Son and grow into maturity as God's one new humanity.

And that maturity is to be measured by Christ's fullness. Now friends, let me just nudge just a little more. Push home just a little more. I am very glad to be here as your pastor teacher.

However, I want to tell you that as I read the scriptures, I've come to the conclusion that the work of ministry here at Holy Trinity is not my ministry. Mind you, I did know that before I came.

There's a great temptation as a clergyman to think that this is my ministry. No, it's not my ministry. The ministry here at Holy Trinity is your ministry. It is your ministry, or should I say it's our ministry.

[31 : 15] It's mine and it is yours. I am not here to do ministry for you. I am here as your pastor teacher.

I am here to train and equip you. And if you are depending on me to do ministry here, then I want to tell you now I will let you down. There are just too many of you here.

I cannot do it. And not only that, God doesn't want me to do it. He wants all of us to do it. The task is not mine. It is yours, or better than that, it is ours.

And more importantly, it is God's. So let's join together in God's great, Christ-centered, gospel-centered project.

And for it to happen, we will have to work together. We will have to work together and we will have to work because it will not happen without us putting the effort in.

[32 : 19] It is the ministry of Christ's church. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you that you have made us one new humanity.

People of different ages and backgrounds and nationalities and colour and sex. You've bound us all together in this incredible new humanity.

This little snapshot, this little pilot project that proclaims your multifaceted wisdom to the whole world and to the heavenly powers.

Father, thank you for your church. But Father, we pray that you would help us to hear what's said in this passage. That is, that the ministry of this church involves us.

That it involves us working together. That it involves us in pushing forward towards the measure of Christ's fullness to full maturity in Christ.

[33 : 33] Father, we pray that you would work amongst us that these things are true. That this reality is reached.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.