

# St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Cosmic Church

*Holy Communion*  
*February 24 2008*

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## The Text

**1** For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— **2** assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, **3** how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. **4** When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, **5** which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. **6** This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

**7** Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. **8** To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, **9** and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, **10** so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. **11** This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, **12** in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. **13** So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

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This has been a week where I think there have been more stories reported in the media about the Anglican Church than in many years. At least twice in eight days, the front page of the *National Post* had photos of two brothers and pastors, David Short and Paul

Charbonneau, whose congregations voted to join the Anglican Network in Canada.

This is a time that is both full of potential and unsettling. It is not my intention this morning to say anything more about what is currently happening within the Anglican World. This will be discussed in detail next Sunday and the following Sunday when we gather for two congregational meetings to become better informed about the current situation.

So while we are aware that there are things happening that are shaking the institutional foundations of our denomination as we have gathered here for Eucharist, I want to draw our attention away from the current challenges to look at with you the glorious statement Paul presents to us in Ephesians 3 concerning the Church of Jesus Christ. As we study and reflect upon what Paul is teaching us here, remember that he was writing these words while under house arrest in Rome, perhaps chained to a Roman guard. And while the confinement he is facing is a hardship that would eventually result in his martyrdom, his thoughts are not centred on his circumstances, but rather on what it means to be in Christ Jesus and members of His Church.

Ephesians 3:1-10 is one of the most profound statements in the New Testament concerning the nature of the Church. It is a passage whose significance will I hope inspire and equip you to better understand what it means to live as members of the body of Christ. There is no better passage needed for a time like this to act as a tonic to equip us to face days of challenge and difficulty that are upon us now.

In what I will say this morning, much of it is drawn from a sermon by the Reverend John Piper. Mr. Piper, is in my mind, one of the clearest contemporary preachers in North America, whose way of phrasing things is alluring and precise. Listen to what he says about the Church of Jesus Christ:

*The church of Jesus Christ is the most important institution in the world. The assembly of the redeemed, the company of the saints, the children of God are more significant in world history than any other group, organization, or nation.*

*The United States of America compares to the church of Jesus Christ like a speck of dust compares to the sun. The drama of international relations compares to the mission of the church like a kindergarten riddle compares to Hamlet or King Lear.*

*And all pomp and wealth of the Oscars fades into a formless grey against the splendor of the bride of Christ. Take heed how you judge. Things are not what they seem. "All flesh is like grass. And all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord (and all his family) abide forever" (1 Peter 1:24, 25).*

*The media and all the powers, and authorities, and rulers, and stars that they present are a mirage. "For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God" says Jesus in Luke 16: 15. The gates of Hades, the powers of death, will prevail against every institution but one, the church. We have Jesus' word on this.*

So lift up your eyes, O Christians! You belong to a society that will never cease, to the apple of God's eye, to the eternal and cosmic church of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

What a provocative statement to stir us and inspire is. Is it not true that we often live our lives with far too little awareness of the stupendous realities around us? Most of us go through day after day and seldom feel the impact of the magnitude of what we are caught up in by belonging to Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the ruler of the universe. And we don't take enough time to meditate on how our jobs, our home life, our leisure, our church involvement—how each of these fits into the cosmic significance of the church. Lent is that time of the year when we are invited to stop and ponder these things. For when we forget who we are and to whom we belong our lives can often lack the flavour of eternity and the aroma of something ultimate.

I pray that we will all be transformed this morning by the renewing of our minds as we better understand what Ephesians 3 says the mission of the church is so that who we are does exude with aroma of something ultimate and we can taste the flavour of eternity.

That mission, or purpose, is stated in verse 10:

so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

To understand our mission to the heavenly places we need to answer three questions:

1) Who are these principalities and powers?

- 2) What is the divine wisdom the church is to make known to them?
- 3) How are we to make it known?

### **1. Who Are the Principalities and Powers?**

Who are the principalities and powers? These two terms are found together in two other places in Ephesians. One is in 6: 11, 12:

*Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

Here the principalities and powers are clearly aligned with the devil. The most natural interpretation would seem to be that principalities and powers refer to supernatural beings in Satan's hosts. They are not mere flesh and blood; that is, they are not merely human. They are supernatural. And they are intent on man's destruction, which is why we need the "armor of God."

Before anyone writes this off as pre-scientific mythology, think again. Is it real evidence or is it just a pervasive mood of secularism that makes Satan and his hosts unpalatable to us modern folk? Again listen to John Piper:

*Have all our modern, scientific advances given us a handle on the evil forces in the world? Is not just the opposite the case: that the cosmic forces of evil manage to get a handle on every human invention and every human institution and corrupt them and turn them for destruction?*

*Nuclear power becomes the basis of international braggadocio and mutual threats of national suicide. Multipurpose petroleum becomes the currency of international blackmail. Pain-relieving drugs become a multi-billion dollar market in life-destroying narcotics. Advances in obstetrical science serve to refine the technique of manslaughter through millions of abortions.*

*Free enterprise degenerates into money-loving greed and exploitation of third world countries. And the grand institution of the university sinks into a Babel normlessness. Are we really so advanced that we can do without the biblical doctrine of demons?*

And I may add how the Church to whom has been entrusted the Glory of God, exchanges the eternal Gospel for some watered down religion in order to accommodate the culture and so dishonours Christ.

Paul said that the principalities and powers were "in the heavenly places" (3:10; 6:12). Literally this is simply "the heavens," the spheres above the earth. The word is used in Ephesians 1:3 where Paul says God has "blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." And it is used in 1:20 where he says God "raised Christ from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places." Therefore we need to think of the heavenly places as the abode of God. But note please it is also the abode of those forces that oppose God and his purpose. We will think about this in more detail when we study chapter six, but it needs to be said now that if there are these forces at work in the spiritual realm therefore we can assume there is conflict and struggle in the heavenly places. And it seems to me that Paul is implicitly stating that how we live here on earth, as the Church in history, has a way of witnessing to those malevolent forces that are outside of time. Our witness will have us working with Jesus or against him in this conflict.

Now where are these heavenly places? I think that if we had asked Paul where they are he would have simply said, "Not on the earth, but far away, and therefore, up. That's the direction you go when you move away from the earth." But it is a pointless task, I think, to try to locate heaven, because God and all the angelic hosts, both good and evil, are spirits with no spatial dimensions. Paul knew this as well as we do, so by locating the principalities and powers in the "heavens," he is simply saying they are not earthly creatures, they come from afar, they inhabit another dimension, a dimension similar to God's and his holy angels'.

But while that is their native sphere of life, they have tremendous influence on earth. All the examples I quoted from John Piper assume that these principalities and powers manifest themselves in the attitudes, inventions, and institutions of society. This is proved by Ephesians 2:1, 2. The same pair of terms (principalities and powers) occurs in verse 2, but is translated in the ESV as: the prince of the power of the air,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the

power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

This text shows that principalities and powers are at work in the sons of disobedience and that there is a "course of this world" which such people follow.

Therefore, the principalities and powers (of Ephesians 3:10) are supernatural hosts in league with Satan and have a cosmic influence on the course of this age, its people, inventions, and institutions. And unless the Church clearly understands her mandate we are so easily duped into actually being in league with Satan and not the Trinity.

### **What Divine Wisdom Are We to Make Known?**

Our second question on Ephesians 3:10 is: What is the divine wisdom the church is to make known to the principalities and powers? I think the best way to answer this question is to see what has in fact been made known to the church. We cannot display to others what has not been shown to us. There are three stages of revelation in Ephesians 3:1–10. First, Paul receives revelation from God (vv. 1–7). Second, the church receives revelation from Paul (vv. 8, 9). Third, the church makes this known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (v. 10). Let's look at these three stages briefly to find out what the content of the revelation is in each case.

In verse 3 Paul says that the mystery was made known to me by revelation. What is this mystery? In verse 4 it is called the "mystery of Christ." Then verse 5 tells us in what sense it is mysterious, and verse 6 tells us just what the content of the secret is. It is mysterious (according to verse 5) in the sense that it was not made known to people before in the way that it has now been revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit. So the secret (or mystery) is not a secret any more. The time has come for the secret to be told to the world. What is it? Verse 6: the revealed secret is that in Christ Jesus and through the gospel the Gentiles are now to become fellow heirs (with Israel), members of the same body, and sharers in the same promise.

Again quoting John Piper:

"In the Old Testament times Israel was God's chosen people, and he gave to them alone the unique benefits of his covenants, his law, his worship, his promises. He did say that through Israel the nations (i.e., Gentiles) would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), but he did not spell out

clearly in what sense or to what degree. And many in Israel did not catch on to the hints in the Old Testament that God intended to include all nations in the blessings promised to Israel. So when Christ came to accomplish just that, many in Israel simply rejected him. But it is clear that Christ came for that purpose: Romans 15: 8 and 9 say:

"Christ became a servant to the circumcised (i.e., Jews) to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy."

This is the mystery of Christ, the Messiah: contrary to most Jewish expectations, he comes to save both Jew and Gentile and to bind them both into one new people who together inherit the promises. This is the church and the nature of this joint Jew and Gentile body is what we considered two weeks ago in looking at chapter 2 verses 12 and following

So the mystery of Christ is that in his death on the cross he purchased not just eternal life for individuals who trust him; he purchased and formed a new people, a church composed of Jews and Gentiles who are both heirs of God's promises and beneficiaries of God's grace. That is the first stage of revelation. Indeed it was because Paul was preaching this that he raised the ire of his own ethnic race, the Jews. They could not accept what he was saying about Jews and Gentiles, Romans and first century Palestinians being co-heirs and members of the same family.

If the first stage of the revelation is Paul receiving this mystery, the second stage of revelation is that Paul preaches this good news to the nations. The gospel Paul preaches is the good news that the Gentiles may become fellow-heirs of Israel's promise by simply trusting Christ. According to verses 8 and 9 Paul saw his task like this:

this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, **9** and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,

When Paul communicates the mystery of Christ to the Gentiles, he has to put it in terms of riches—riches of grace. The essence of the mystery which he proclaims to us Gentiles is this: since Christ is the one through whom we become heirs of all the promises made to God's people, therefore, there are unsearchable riches in Christ. The astounding mystery and gospel proclamation is that we Gentiles can have all these riches through faith in Christ. According to Ephesians

2:7, the reason God rescued us from death and made us alive with Christ is "that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." The astonishing secret of God is that he sent his Messiah to die for sins and to rise again in order to create a church of Jews and Gentiles on whom he could spend an eternity lavishing every possible blessing with all his infinite might.

And now that this has been made known to the Gentiles (to us) and has begun to create that people (the church), the third stage of revelation happens in verse 10: "That through the church (this new, unified people) the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." Returning to John Piper, he comments:

"I take it, then, that the wisdom of God is primarily the wisdom it took to devise a plan of redemption as great as this: a plan to unite and glorify Jew and Gentile, contrary to all human expectation, by the horrible death of the mighty Messiah. The wisdom of God is virtually the same as the mystery of Christ revealed to Paul. In 1 Corinthians 2:7 Paul says, "We speak the hidden wisdom of God in a mystery, which God foreordained before the ages for our glory." God's wisdom is the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11) by which he ordained from all eternity to glorify the church through the unthinkable death of his Son. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, 24 Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Christ crucified for the unification and glorification of Jews and Gentiles in the church is the mystery of God and the wisdom of God."

It is this wisdom that we as the church of Jesus Christ are to make known, which in turn leads us to answer our third question:

### **How are we to make this wisdom Known?**

How are we, the church, to make this wisdom known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places? I don't think Paul means that the cosmic mission of the church is to inform the satanic hosts about the purpose of God in sending Christ to die for our unification and glorification. They know all too well what God wants. That's why they can oppose him so effectively. What the church is to do is demonstrate the wisdom in God's mysterious plan. The wisdom of a plan is seen by the fact that it works. We show the wisdom of God by showing in the church that it is working. The death of Christ was

not in vain: it has reconciled us to God, it has broken down the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile and other races, it has produced one new body, and it has given us the hope of his immeasurable kindness forever. We show the wisdom of God to the cosmic powers by living this way, by being the church Christ died to create.

It is because of this calling that the challenges we are facing in the Anglican Church today are so significant. I believe what is happening is a refining of the Church that finds expression in the name "Anglican" so that we can become what we are called to be. This is a struggle that calls for our all, because it is primarily a battle that is waged in concert with Jesus. And what we are called to be primarily is witnesses to the heavenly powers that oppose Jesus and his kingdom.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have an incomparable calling. It stretches our imagination to the limit. This text is a summons to us to set our minds on things that are unseen, stupendous heavenly realities that have worldwide bearing on the course of this age. It is within this context that we need to see our current struggles. We don't usually hit targets that we are not aiming at. And the target for the church is to demonstrate to the evil powers of the cosmos that God has been wise in sending his Son to die that we might have hope and be unified in one body, the church. Therefore, when we fail to live in hope and to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we send this signal through the galaxies: God's purpose is failing; he was not wise, he was foolish.

And so while there is a great sense of disunity at present, I believe that Jesus is at work renewing his bride, his Anglican Church so that we can live more fully in a unity that stems from a deeper commitment to being in Christ. This is a unity based on theological coherence and not institutional compliance and because it is a struggle of such immense proportions we can only engage in it wisely with a text like this deeply engrained in our imaginations.

Each one of us is called to use our God-given abilities to dispense grace and strengthen faith in these days of challenge. To you your part may seem small, but that as a part of God's eternal revelation of his glory it takes on stupendous proportions. Now we can see just how stupendous, for what's at stake is not merely being the light of the world, but the light of the cosmos.

John Piper says:

The church is the cosmic showcase of God's mercy, and if we fail to live as joyful beneficiaries of his mercy and fail to maintain the unity of the Spirit, we bring a cosmic reproach upon the wisdom of God."

My prayer this morning for all of us is that we might keep before ourselves this new incentive for walking worthily of our calling, in all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The new incentive is this: all the principalities and powers in the heavenly places are watching this week to see if we, the church, will live as if God is wise or as if he is foolish. Let's show them by the way we live that God's mysterious plan is not failing!