

Without Measure: Christ and the Limits of reality *Jesus Talk* 21.6.20 Ephesians 2:17-22 John 3:31-36

Audio: <https://www.daleappleby.net/index.php/mp3-sermons/51-recent-sermons/1040-without-measure>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kz9RyhddseE&list=UUkz-PyfZ7TSSOOVsH7OUegQ>

“He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He bears *witness* to what he has seen and heard, yet *no one receives his testimony*. 33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent *utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure*. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” (John 3: 31-36)

Introduction

When I woke Monday morning at 3:34 a.m. my mind went to these words of Christ, “For he whom God has sent *utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure*.” Tonight’s teaching is about the immeasurable life of Christ.

Downsizing Jesus is a constant problem for the Church. Back in 1955 renowned Bible translator J.B. Phillips published a book titled *Your God is Too Small*, dedicated to exposing inadequate conceptions of God that limit Christian growth. Phillips was on the right track, but his approach was not Christ-centred enough. Our vision of God is too small because our image of Jesus, the visible “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), is too small. All that we can know about the Father is mediated to us through the humanity of Christ (1 Tim 2:5). And Jesus, as Argentinian Pentecostal Juan Carlos Ortiz so memorably said, is no longer, “the bearded sandaled one of the Gospels” (<https://crossingtheriver.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/livingwithjesustoday.pdf>.) Whilst Christ’s character has not changed, his dignity and authority are no longer limited by the constraints of space and time. He now rules over “all things” presently placing all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor 15:25, 27; Eph 1:22; Heb 2:8). Any move of God with *lasting* implications at a societal level requires a rediscovery of the true dimensions of the life of Christ.

The Western world has become increasingly plunged into irrationality and self-obsession, with the quest for human identity shrunk down to things like gender, race and sexuality, is that the Church has lost its saltiness and placed its light under a measuring bowl (Matt 5:13-16). We have stepped back from a limitless prophetic vision of the trinitarian dimensions of the plan of God expressed in Christ.

The Eternal Foundation

Increasing our awareness of the magnitude of the plan of God begins with insight into its foundations. Which is why those spiritual traditions which place Jesus in the framework of a response to Adam’s sin seriously weaken the majesty of the purposes of God. In teaching, “Adam was a type/symbol of Christ who was to come” (Rom 5:14) Paul testifies that Adam was created in the likeness of Jesus. This makes little sense if we are bound by our natural way of thinking about time, but the biblical revelation of Christ shatters all our ordinary perceptions. When John speaks of, “the Lamb who was slain from *before the foundation of the world*.” (Rev 13:8), when Paul

astoundingly says, “This grace (of salvation) was given us in Christ Jesus *before the beginning of time*” (2 Tim 1:9) and when Peter testifies of Jesus, “like a lamb, without spot or blemish, was chosen *before the foundation of the world*” (1 Pet 1:20) it is plain that space and time are shaped to serve God’s plan in Christ (Col 1:15), and not the other way around. Which is why I put Romans 11:36, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Rom 11:36) on my wedding programme 45 years ago.

When Paul insists, “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 3:11), he excludes tradition, reason, experience, doctrine, giftings, money or personality as foundational to the existence of the Church; her unlimited beauty and destiny is Jesus alone. When Jesus attributed to himself the attributes of God Almighty, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”” (Rev 22:13) he was not articulating ideas but testifying about his life. A fascination with elevated abstract concepts was the root spiritual problem with my Ph.D. thesis on *The Timelessness of God*. It is the presence of Jesus in his limitless life which is the irresistible constraint of prophetic proclamation. As it says in Amos, “Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.⁸ The lion has roared – who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken – *who can but prophesy?*” (Amos 3:7-8).

In Ephesians 2 Paul declares the indispensability of prophets for the maturing of the Church, “the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:19-20). Prophets are foundational to Church health because they keep calling God’s people of God back to be conformed to what he prays in the next chapter, “to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth (1) and length (2) and height (3) and depth (4), 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be *filled with all the fullness of God.*” (Eph 3:18-19). Paul knows there are only 3 physical dimensions, but seized by the Spirit in testifying of the riches of the indwelling Christ he expresses through overabundance of terms the vastness of the great ways of God in Jesus.

Small Mindedness

The Lord has been embarrassing me recently about my small-mindedness. Lest you think I am boastful in my false humility, I have brought in my gloves collection, picked up as I am prayer-walking along roads, bike tracks and through construction sites. This collection will outlive me, so what’s my problem, and yours?

I/we haven’t taken 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 to heart, “For *all things* are yours, 22 ...Paul... Apollos...Cephas...the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.” ? or, 1 Corinthians 6:2-3, “the saints will judge *the world*... we are to judge angels?”; or Revelation 5:9-10, “by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” Or, “my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). The Lord has been speaking to me about a “poverty spirit”, but NOT in the way you might think.

I was listening to a rich pastor from a health-wealth church a few years ago, and I discerned clearly that she had a deep-seated fear of material poverty. Every time I hear a pastor mention the number of people in “their” church or an evangelist talk of the number of countries he’s

preached in I am hearing a poverty spirit bound by the dimensions of this world. This is understandable amongst the lost. Without being “born from above” (John 3:3, 7 ESV) sinful humanity is trapped in the reality described in Ecclesiastes (3:11), God “has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he *cannot find out* what God has done from the beginning to the end.” But in knowing him who *is* the beginning and the end, Jesus (Rev 22:13), our eyes should be open to the true expanse of human destiny.

Idols are always the problem, and Romans 1: 23 blatantly tells us sinners have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man”. You might have heard this now famous quote; “Our deepest fear is not that we are weak. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world ... As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” (falsely attributed to Nelson Mandela).

Our evangelism can be motivated by the revelation that that there will “a great multitude that no one could number” from all nations eternally worshipping God and the Lamb (Rev 7:9-10), our assurance of the power of the gospel to forgive without measure flows from the knowledge, “as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” (Ps 103:12), our need for wisdom in all circumstances is met by “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” in Christ (Col 2:3), distress at our feeble attempts at spiritual growth are overwhelmed by the revelation that “in the coming ages he (God) might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7) and that we are already immersed in the “unfathomable/unsearchable/boundless riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). These things are so great (Heb 2:3) they can only be known by supernatural revelation. Thankfully, God is up to something in our time.

A friend of mine was recently facilitating a Zoom prayer meeting with people from Perth and Mongolia (4/6/20). After a while he noticed a Mongolian lady with her head on her desk apparently crying. When he went inquired if everything was OK, she said; “Yes, I am fine just overwhelmed and shocked but greatly encouraged as the sister who had been praying in the Spirit in town X had been speaking in clear Mongolian.” Of course, the Australian lady had no knowledge of Mongolian. The translation into English of the Mongolian was, “that God was so delighted that we had come together in united prayer before His Throne of grace, and His *exhaustless* power was being released over Mongolia.” The thrilling word that stood out to me in the context of my teaching tonight is “exhaustless”. The point is not that *God* is exhaustless, or that he is exhaustless in Mongolia, the message is there are no limits to the presence and power of God in Jesus *for us* (Eph 1:19).

Christ

As always, the cross is the key to prophetic insight. Prophetic wisdom comes to those who through rejection have let go of conventional ways of seeing the world. Back in John 3:31-36 Jesus explained that earthly people can only see earthly things and cannot receive his testimony from heaven *because* it is given in “the Spirit without measure” for his possession of “all things”. It was people of narrow vision who had to prove their insight was true by having Jesus crucified and who always oppress the prophets. Such people never understand the scriptural witness that the vastness of Christ is the fruit of his lowliness.

The self-emptying of the Son of God commenced in his descent from heaven (Phil 2:7) but reached its climax on the cross. Our common-sense small mindedness comes from our struggle to see in the Spirit that the death of Jesus is the genesis of the limitless new creation created for us to share with him forever. We do not believe that the life of Job is a type of Christ, that the wilderness is the only way to the Promised Land or that the last are first (Matt 19:30). Somehow, why is for you to judge, I always end up back at Jesus' cry, "My God...why have you forsaken me?". This comes from Psalm 22:1, which goes on to express the subhuman experience of the righteous sufferer. "I am *a worm and not a man*, scorned by mankind and despised by the people." (v.6). Inspired by the Spirit the psalmist describes the depths of Christ's humiliation in terms of the lowest of creatures. In scripture worms speak of a state of degradation, decay and death (Ex 16:20) abhorrent to normal life (Isa 66:24). In his warnings of hell Jesus described a state of damnation, "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." (Mark 9:48 cf. Isa 66:24). This place of unbridgeable distance from God and interminable suffering was what Jesus took in our place on the cross, where his sinless humanity is stripped of the conscious glory of the Father and compressed to the extremes of inwardness. The exact opposite of the limitless dimensions of life he has now entered into for all who trust in him (2 Tim 1:10).

As a young preacher I was rightly criticised for preaching too much on spiritual breakthrough. I had yet to learn that there can be *no breakthrough without breakdown* and that on the cross enduring hellish torment for us, Christ took our breakdown for that we might enter the limitless riches of his kingdom. To embrace this, gospel, transforms everything.

The Really Real

The early Christian communities were amazing in their ability to show "no partiality" (cf. Acts 10:34; Gal 2:6; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1 Tim 5:21; James 2:1, 9) on the basis of race, gender, learning, social position or class (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), because in spiritually seeing the glorified humanity of Christ they now saw all things differently (2 Cor 5:16-17). They understood that distinctions of this age count for nothing in the age to come. The really real isn't the world you can see or measure, the really real is the Word of God holding all things (Heb 1:3) together in their presently weakened state, but who will, when he returns, "transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to *subject all things* to himself." (Phil 3:21). These earliest communities were genuinely prophetic, in that they recognised society's rejection of their testimony to Jesus was for the purpose of pressing deeper and deeper into him for their own growth and for the salvation of the world. We have a great deal to learn.

Conclusion

The leaders of the Church must *always* keep before the people of God the limitless expanse of who they are in Christ. Anglicans will be familiar with this declaration of praise, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son: and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: *world without end*. Amen." "World without end" may sound quaint and outdated but in Christ it is charged with a level of meaning that is indispensable to Church health. It represents what must move us to attempt by every means to express the inexpressible riches of Christ (2 Cor 9:15).

Donna correctly says to me at times, “You live in a different world.” Not an escapist world or a world of denial or fantasy, but in prayer and the Word a getting in touch with the realms of Christ past, present and future, as well as life in the heavenly places. To live in this way is both glorious and extraordinarily difficult. Do you want to enter ever more deeply into this world? Are the investments of our time, talents and treasure primarily in this world or in the world to come whose substance already exists in Christ? Whilst it’s impossible to count the blessings of eternity there is a way of counting that opens up our eyes to the “unfathomable/unsearchable/boundless riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). Jesus exhorted us to “count the cost” of following him by making every relationship and possession in this life secondary to himself (Luke 11:25-33). The sheer fact is, the more you count the cost and give up everything for Jesus and the gospel the greater the revelation of the true dimensions of Christ