

Notes on Ephesians 1:5–6, 15–19, Revelation 21: 1–7 ‘The Destiny of Love’

This week I had the privilege of representing this church and our town at Okehampton College where our daughter Steffi teaches. One lad was so inspired by me that he wants to live in Dronfield!! I was asked by a student whether I had ever doubted my faith? It is a great question, and I used it in the four house assemblies I gave where I linked it to the Aberfan disaster of 1966 because Gilli and I had paused for thought when we walked through there on holiday recently. Such a great question requires a great answer and verses 5 and 6 I think are really helpful in giving such an answer. However, if the doctrine of election has had a bad press, then predestination has had an even worse one. But I think verses 5 and 6 when they speak of predestination point to a healthy, whole and heartfelt understanding of God's purposes which is to feed our hearts, our minds and our souls. These verses fill our lives with hope and therefore they fill them faith and love too, and this is exactly what Paul prays for them in verses 15 – 19. You could say that every part of that prayer is rooted in and celebrates predestination.

In 2005 the satirical tv series, ‘The Thick of it’ was screened and 20 years ago and I read a newspaper article this week which spoke of how realistic that series is to recent governments. In an episode it describes an ad hoc and chaotic government plucking nonsense policies out of thin air to show it was doing something, such as everyone having to always carry a plastic bag of their own, of pet ASBO's and a national spare room database. The article's final reflection was that the series shouldn't be rescreened because it is not a laughing matter. Whenever people speak about predestination you also get the sense that it is no laughing matter either. God is described as someone who is utterly capricious in choosing who he wishes and people are deprived of genuine response to the Good News since it is already determined. Some take the logic even further by speaking of double predestination where God not only chooses for salvation, he also chooses for damnation. I find this very hard to reconcile with what I think the Bible as a whole is truly saying and in particular what verses 5 and 6 and the link to verse 4 actually mean.

First of all, I want to say that I do believe deeply in both election and predestination. When we read what Paul says in verse 4 it is very easy for us to feel both dispirited and disappointed because we know just how demanding verse 4 is, and how much we fail to live as those who are called and chosen to be holy and blameless. In fact, because we know how much we fail we can be tempted to wonder if in fact we are genuinely chosen at all. But this is where verses 5 and 6 are so important. Verses 5 and 6 reassure us that we are chosen by God and they remind us that nothing that we do can make God either love us more or love us less. Verses 5 and 6 speak of God's utter determination for us to be now, and in the future, to be both holy and blameless. These verses do this in three ways.

Firstly, they speak of our being adopted by God into his family in verse 5. Adoption language is wonderful and there is a strong echo of the Exodus here which all ‘son’ language has. In verse 5 we are told in no uncertain terms that God has adopted us and made us his children. We are reminded that our identity is rooted in our belonging to him as those who are loved and treasured by him and where nothing can take us

out of his hands. There are many Old Testament texts which say the same thing and a good one is Genesis 17. In this chapter God confirms to Abram the promise that he will have a son and through him his family will grow to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. It says that when God showed Abram the stars in the sky, he believed him and it was credited to him as righteousness. In other words, Abram knew he was safely held in the astonishing love of God. When we turn to the New Testament the resonance is with the Roman practice of when families would adopt a slave to be an heir, if they didn't have one, as this would ensure the estate's survival. In Roman Law the emphasis is upon the choosing of a son, but Paul also knew about the Old Testament practice which enabled daughters to inherit if there was no son, such as in Numbers 27. So, when he speaks of a son, he is also thinking of daughters too.

Secondly, Paul in verse 6 speaks about the grace which is lavished on us all to live holy and blameless lives. In 2 Corinthians 12 verse 9 Paul speaks of his own experience of how God's grace was sufficient for him and will be for us to live holy and blameless lives. By God's grace we are empowered and enabled to resist any temptation which comes our way, as described in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 13. Therefore, when Paul speaks of God's grace, he is saying that we can choose to live obedient to what God wills and desires because we are empowered to do so by the Spirit who dwells within us.

Thirdly, and finally, the best part of predestination is the guarantee that we will all one day be like Jesus. This is our destiny, this is our future and Revelation 21 verses 1 – 7 celebrates this. In this passage John describes what New Creation looks like and for us, the church, we are described as being like a bride which has been prepared for her husband. We will be resurrected in such a way that we will be remade perfect, there will be no spot or blemish and Jesus will delight in us. John points us to the Old Testament promise of God being our God and we being his people and he says that then it will be perfected. One of my favourite clunky phrases is 'Inaugerated Eschatology'. What this means is that we experience something of our destiny and our future right now. Right now, we know that God dwells with us. Right now, we know that our lives already bear the mark of New Creation. Right now, we know that we can live out new creation in our lives. Right now, we know that by the Spirit we are enabled and empowered to love God and to love our neighbour, which fulfils the Law. Right now, we know that we are able to live in the Spirit. Right now, we know that we are declared to be holy and blameless and that we can live so. We know this to be true because right now we know that the future is here and is among us now.

One of my favourite bits of last week at Okehampton College was when a student said, 'You're Mrs Grace's Dad? In school?' Wow, that's crazy!! This father-daughter relationship in the school is my greatest privilege, but it is also my greatest responsibility – I didn't want to let my daughter down. As children of the King, this is our greatest privilege, but it is also our greatest responsibility too. Predestination rather than disturbing us, is to inspire us and to excite us to live like this. Predestination says this is what one day you will be, so don't put it off, live like it now!!