

SERMON – 16/8/26

Romans 11:33-36

"Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God." (Romans 11:33)

The last few weeks we have been reading verses from the very heart of Paul's magnificent Letter to the Romans – from the climactic chapter 8 which could actually easily have occupied us for several months if we had wanted to, to the section in chapters 9 to 11 where the apostle wrestles with the specific question of God's purpose for the Jewish people. Today we have read the closing few verses of chapter 11 which are a hymn of praise at the end of Paul's exposition of the Gospel message in the letter before he turns, as we will next week, to the 'So what now?' section of practical application. And I want us to sit and ponder for a while this morning as we draw breath at the beginning of a new session in the life of the church: who is this God who is the giver of our life, the author of our salvation, the One who calls us to follow and who promises us new life? I'd like to invite you to go on a journey in your imagination this morning and hopefully to stretch your thinking in a way that might give you a hankering to explore something new in the realm of faith over the course of the coming year. It's true to say that none of us knows what we don't know until someone points it out to us or until we push open a door or take a path we haven't seen before and discover something new. So let me invite you to be open this morning and to see whether there might be something new for you to discover about God this year.

For a start, let me suggest that you think about the dimensions that exist in the physical world. Every physical object and every physical space has three dimensions. It may be long or short, it may be wide or narrow, it may be high or low. You can go on a very long walk such as the path around Loch Leven that takes several hours to cover and you may discover many different things – plants or animals or views – but you could also take just a single step and find everything changed in an instant, perhaps by a word or an image or an encounter. You may be able to see a wide panoramic view and take in a whole variety of sights from

one vantage point or you might focus narrowly on just one thing – perhaps a flower head or even a single petal – and be amazed at its unique and complex beauty. You could look to the heavens with or without the aid of a telescope and be astonished at the vastness of the universe or you could delve into the secrets of molecular chemistry and the building blocks that are revealed down a microscope. The physical world is high and wide and long and deep and there is so much more for each of us to discover if we are open to it. Add in the fourth dimension of time and the same journey or the same object may offer even more to discover one day than it has given up many times before.

The psalmist ponders the multidimensional wonder of creation and I invite you to close your eyes and let these words take you on a journey in your imagination:

“Lord, where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand – when I awake, I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:7-18)

How much more of this world is there for you to discover! That may take you up mountains or into cave systems or diving in the sea. It may take you on journeys to far off places or it may take you into the library or online or to school or college or university. Or it may take you into yet another dimension that you have yet to discover fully, and that is the spiritual realm.

I have always found the words of this morning's reading from Romans utterly thrilling. The apostle Paul has been exploring the wonders of the good news about Jesus Christ and its significance and its consequences for eleven chapters and it's as if he just runs out of words and gasps in worship: "Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom.11:33)

Many of us have spent a lifetime exploring what our physical senses can take in and have delighted to stretch our minds and fulfil our longing for new human experiences through the arts and through science, through travel and through technology but if there is more to discover in the *natural* world then how much more still is there for us when we begin to tap into the realm of the Spirit.

If I might be permitted to quote you another chunk from the Old Testament this morning, I would take you to the closing chapters of the Book of Job, which if you have ever waded your way through it is a very hard book to read, dealing as it does with extreme physical suffering, the dark night of the soul and the worst of human and religious attempts at offering comfort to a struggling fellow mortal. Job himself, for all his patience and integrity, is not without fault, determined as he is to justify himself and refusing to bow to the higher hand of God. But then the Lord Himself addresses Job out of a storm:

"Brace yourself like a man; God says to Job: I will question you, and you shall answer me. 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?" (Job 38:3-7)

He goes on for no fewer than four chapters of question after question after question:

'Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place?

Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew?

'Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion's belt? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out Leo with its cubs?'

'Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane? Do you make it leap like a locust, striking terror with its proud snorting?' (Job 38-41 *passim*)

What we are being shown is that if we are willing to ask questions of God, be it in regard to the wonders of the physical creation or the mysteries of the spiritual dimension, there is more for us to discover than we could possibly imagine. Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians that God, out of His glorious riches, may strengthen them with power through his Spirit in their inner being, so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith. And He goes on to pray not only for the church in Ephesus but also for the Church throughout time, including us that 'being rooted and established in love, [we] may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that [we] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.' (Eph.3:17-19)

In what we read from Romans this morning it is revealed to us that there is spiritual wisdom and knowledge and paths of understanding that are unsearchably deep and beyond tracing out and what I want to encourage us all to do in the coming year is to dip our toe just a little bit deeper into whatever we have already experienced of God in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit and to discover what more there might be for us for our growth in grace and for the fulness of life that Jesus has promised to those who walk with Him. What that will look like may be different for each of us – for one it will be developing a new spiritual discipline of personal prayer or study; for another it may be discovering a new expression of church fellowship in a house-group or a different way of praying with others, or as we begin to develop new styles of worship across the united parish; for others it may be something no-one has yet even dreamt of as God builds the Kingdom in new ways in these days.

None of us yet fully knows the mind of the Lord, but the greatest commandment is this: to love the Lord our God with all our heart

and all our soul and all our mind so that we might love our neighbour in a more Christlike way. What are you and I being called to do this session to explore that? The journey starts now. Where will it take you, I wonder?

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?' For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen."