

Ephesians 1:3-10 The Horse Before the Cart
January 5, 2025

We come to this reading in Ephesians at the beginning of the new year, another journey around the sun. We look forward with both anticipation and apprehension because each new year brings difficulty as well as wonder and sometimes joy.

It is a custom to make New Year's resolutions. Some people still do, while I understand that others have given up the habit. To anticipate the near future and make some goals and commitments can be healthy and good if it is done with some measure of balance, lest it consumes life obsessively, or else, more likely, is forgotten altogether. But it almost always regards mundane concerns.

There are *immediate* demands of daily life, and we seek guidance about the decisions before us *and* about how we might deport ourselves in a Christlike manner. These *are* important demands that must be faced in a responsible and faithful way.

It is also healthy, living in this pragmatic industrialized world as we do, to survey the larger context of our lives. That is what Paul does consistently. And he suggests a chronological ordering of things. First consider the eternal, divine, spiritual things, then make decisions about the details.

One might think of the proverbial relationship between the horse and the cart. To put the cart before the

horse is to get things out of order in a way that gums up the works. Horses do better pulling than pushing.

Any reader of Paul will notice the difference between his letters. They each address a different specific context and offer responses to different topics. Yet in them, Paul addresses more generally the meaning of our humanity as well.

He establishes a pattern. His letters begin with descriptions of the way things are generally, and then at the end offer practical applications in more specific terms. Some recognize this distinction as the indicative and imperative.

In Romans, for instance, Paul talks about;

The wrath of God revealed against all unrighteousness; about justification by faith and not works of law; about how the whole world has been subjected to futility in hope, just to name a few.

In Ephesians, on the other hand, everything sounds different, but the same order applies. He speaks of the heavenly realms and every spiritual blessing in Christ; of all wisdom and understanding, the mystery of his will, with the goal to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth, under Christ.

Later he tells his audience that the struggle is not against flesh and blood, "but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark

world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

One is reminded of 2 Corinthians when he said, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. (9:22) Paul manages to speak in ways that are well-suited to his audience, and to show a remarkable adaptability to relate well to people in diverse situations. The result of is a variety of expressions of the good news.

Yet he maintains his pattern; the higher theological considerations first, then applications to daily life. We recognize that the gospel has invited us away from a pre-occupation with the immediate circumstances of life. It asks us to set aside, for a little while, the everyday tasks and decisions that must be done, in order to consider the implications of what Paul calls life in, “the heavenly realms.”

It is only when we think and act with thought and commitment given to the spiritual life and to eternity, that everyday life, shall I say, even historical life, has meaning, that we can put the horse before the cart where it belongs.

This invitation is meant to be observed on a regular basis, and the new year seems like a good place to accept it. To ignore daily concerns won't work for long on the one hand, but on the other if eternity is neglected it can be overshadowed by the immediate demands. Thus, the cart out in front of the horse.

By this consideration of the, “heavenly realms,” I do not mean the life of the church, for the context of church life can be swallowed up also as an immediate part of life. The focus can be almost completely devoted to the demands of daily life.

There are Christian or biblical ideas about how to manage money, about family life; parenting and marriage, which involve the most intimate and personal relationships we know; and questions about vocation and citizenship. And there are the issues like fixing organ blowers and repairing towers to consider. Church life is, of this earth.

What is meant is an attention towards the meaning of Creation and Redemption, thinking about the nature of God, grace, and faith. This focus is not the earthly big picture; the economic, political, the cultural, in short, the historical, but the theological side of life.

The reading from Ephesians at the beginning of the letter sets us on the proper course and in the right frame of mind, and is appropriate as we complete the celebration of Christ's birth, and get on with another year.

The guiding principle of the gospel can be described as follows; that God has created a magnificent universe, inhabited by human beings, who by the creative decision of God, have self-consciousness and a measure of freedom, by which they can either accept or reject their being in God.

Furthermore, the divine decision was also for grace and mercy, in which those who have fallen into sin and have managed in their freedom to become lost, disconnected, sick, to have put the cart before the horse, so to speak, have been set free again to live a new life in God.

Creation and redemption, liberation and reconciliation are the umbrella under which we live and move and have our being. When this has been acknowledged and accepted, life becomes new. There is no unredeemable situation, no disruption that can disturb the peace, no barrier that cannot be transcended, no guilt that can't be forgiven, no disease of the soul that can't be healed.

Though we live on earth, waiting for the times to be fulfilled, we live towards heaven, for that is our destination. We hear these words and think the highest thoughts about the grand design of our lives,

about having been, “predestined for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.

With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into

effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”

One can see that this is horse before the cart thinking, and a good way to start out the new year. With this foundation, daily life becomes a possibility again of goodness. We can find meaning in pleasure and pain, in family and friendship, in work and in play, in sickness and health, in death and in life. in the passage of time, in another new year,

And because of this hope, we can, from the fountain of our own hearts, live obediently, a life of love and kindness, compassion and concern for others, joy and peace, assurance and blessing. Amen.

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