

Sunday 19th July 2015. Seventh after Trinity. Canongate Kirk.

Ephesians 3:18-19 *May you, in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love.*

Or as the old children's chorus puts it: so high you can't get over it, so deep you can't get under it, so wide you can't get round it, such wonderful love....Our call to worship this morning, our opening sentence is one of those typically succinct summaries of St Paul that puts everything else into perspective. His main concern in writing to the Ephesians was to stress the urgent need for unity – *May you, in company with all God's people* he begins, reminding them that they are not alone, that however isolated they might feel they are part of a much bigger picture, that however unloved they might feel they are never beyond the reach of Christ's own all-encompassing love. *May you, in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love.*

*Just as I am, of that free love
The breadth, length, depth and height to prove*

A love, a free love that could not be contained, could not be limited. So high you can't get over it, so deep you can't get under it, so wide you can't get round it, such wonderful love. *May you, in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love.*

Such dimensions –breadth and length and height and depth – would have been taken carefully into consideration in the building of a royal palace for King David, which the second book of Samuel informs us was a house of cedar. Cedar wood, especially from the type of tree known as cedar of Lebanon was often used in the construction of royal palaces. The timber was of a warm red colour and its planks were not only long in length – for they were magnificently tall trees – but long-lasting and easily carved and decorated in a manner suitable for the ornate residences it was meant to adorn. And so we can assume that David's palace, his house of cedar, was indeed a lovely dwelling-place, ornate and impressive as befits a royal residence. But once he is established in his palace and feeling quite at home, suddenly King David feels guilty and summons Nathan the prophet to discuss matters. "See now, I am living in a house of cedar", he declares, "but the Ark of God stays in a tent". Speaking through Nathan, God is clearly reluctant to be restricted to any kind of house, whatever wood it might be made of. "I have not lived in a house since the day I brought the people of Israel from Egypt to this day; but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" In due course God would ordain that David's successor, Solomon, would build him a house, a truly lovely dwelling-place, a magnificent cedar wood temple, but for now he would not be so restricted, he could not be so contained. As we hear in our opening set of prayers every Sunday, *the heaven of heavens cannot contain him, much less the temples which our hands have built...The heaven of heavens cannot contain him. May you, in*

company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love.

Our Gospel reading reminds us how Christ's love simply could not be contained either. In his sixth chapter St Mark reports how he tried to get a break with his disciples. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves", he said to them, "and rest a while". With so many coming and going, the gospel writer explains, they had no time even to eat. So they set off by boat privately for a remote place. And how they must have yearned to find such a place, and to be left undisturbed even for a little while. Time to eat, time to rest, time to relax. But no such luck. Because many saw them leave and recognized them, we hear, and people from all the towns hurried round on foot and arrived there first. How exasperating! How infuriating! How frustrating! And yet as soon as Jesus came ashore and saw a large crowd, he did not turn round and get back in the boat, he did not even hesitate but simply accepted the situation. His heart went out to them, his compassion could not be contained and he began to teach them many things and later he healed the sick that were brought to him when they landed at Gennesaret and exactly the same thing happened again. Wherever he went, to village or town or farm, he laid the sick in the market-place and begged him to let them simply touch the edge of his cloak; and all who touched him were healed. From east and west, from north and south they came and all who touched him were healed and all who were touched by his teaching were blessed. *May you, in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love.* A love that cannot be contained. A compassion that cannot be restricted.

New Horizons is the name of the space probe that recently sent photos of Pluto back to earth, a distance of some miles. Ice mountains as big as the Rockies and smooth unbroken expanses never seen before, all clearly revealed during what was quaintly described as a fly by as the probe continued on its uncharted way to ever new horizons.

*While all the stars that round her burn,
And all the planets, in their turn,
Confirm the tidings, as they roll,
And spread the truth from pole to pole.*

New horizons. That in a sense is exactly what St Paul tries to convey to the Ephesians, that Christ's love goes beyond anything that they can begin to imagine, it goes where no one has gone before, it breaks all the barriers down, it pushes all the boundaries, it cannot be contained or restricted. Not then and not now.

*For the love of God is broader
Than the grasp of mortal mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.*

May you, in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.