

SERMON: 7 May 2017 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“Immeasurably more”

Ephesians 3:7-21

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.....

Sometimes we do not see what is right in front of us. We hunt for something and it is closer than we realise. Have you ever looked for your glasses and they are on the top of your head? Last week I hunted all over the house for my phone and found it in the back pocket of my jeans when it suddenly beeped. One of my sons hunted for his car keys for most of last Saturday and found them in the secure pocket of his backpack where he always puts them to keep them safe. You know that feeling, I've put it somewhere safe and now I've forgotten where that safe place is!

I'd been in my new house for a week before I discovered a gate at the bottom of the garden leading straight into the field. It isn't a big garden, the gate had been there all the time but I hadn't taken a look behind a bush to see it. There was something biblical about finding a gate onto a meadow. Jesus is the gate and through him all things are possible – if only we can see him, see the gate! (John 10:7).

We had been in the house for about a month when another of my sons said “I like the cool light on the bathroom cabinet.” I said that there isn't a light on the cabinet! He showed it to me – a small on/off symbol on the mirror that acted like a touch screen and illuminated the whole room! I had seen the symbol every day but did not recognise it – and would probably still not have found the light if my son hadn't pointed it out. Biblical again! We only find the light when we recognise what we are looking for!

Paul tells us in today's reading that the grace and power and purposes of God were a **“mystery which for ages past was kept hidden in God who created all things” (verse 9)**. God was always present but not clearly visible. Moses and the prophets of old caught glimpses of almighty God in cloud and fire, on mountain top and inner sanctuary of the temple, in a still small voice or the roaring thunder.

But Paul says, verse 10 – **His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known....**

How has God accomplished this? Verse 11 – **according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”**

And so the church is God's accomplishment for working out his purposes in the world. God did not send his son to suffer and die and rise again and establish his church, only to allow that church to flounder and fail. Christian denominations and independent fellowships might rise and fall, come and go, but the church in the broadest sense will never fail and will be ready for Christ's return.

Jesus Christ is head of the church which is his body. He is the church's one and only foundation. Paul is desperate that we grasp how extravagant and limitless is the power and love of Jesus for us.

He encourages us to reach out and experience its breadth

Test its length

Plumb the depths

Rise to the heights

Be filled with the vastness of Jesus

The church is described as the bride and Christ is the bridegroom. When Christ comes again, the church is to be prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband (Revelation 21 : 2). How much the bridegroom loves his bride. What a joyous day of celebration when Christ returns to his church and raises up the bride.

Until that day, Christ will continue to equip and empower his church, you and I. But so often we only seem to tap into a tiny portion of that power.

Paul says **"God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" verse 20**

Immeasurably means limitless, without bounds, infinite.

As a church we ask for a little and he wants to give us a ton.

Our imaginations are sometimes pathetic and narrow and he wants to show us his glorious plans for the future.

Our vision is a 2 inch phone screen and he wants to show us the biggest picture ever.

He will equip us with whatever we ask for and whatever we need for his mission in the world; we just need to think bigger and let our imaginations loose.

Jesus said "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for fish, will give him a snake?.....how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him." Note, those who ASK him.

Verse 20 in The Message - God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He

does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

Not by pushing us around but by the work of his holy spirit within us, deeply and gently and quietly. People are loved into the kingdom of God, not coerced. The church is encouraged and equipped and convicted through the still calm voice of the Lord, not through coercion.

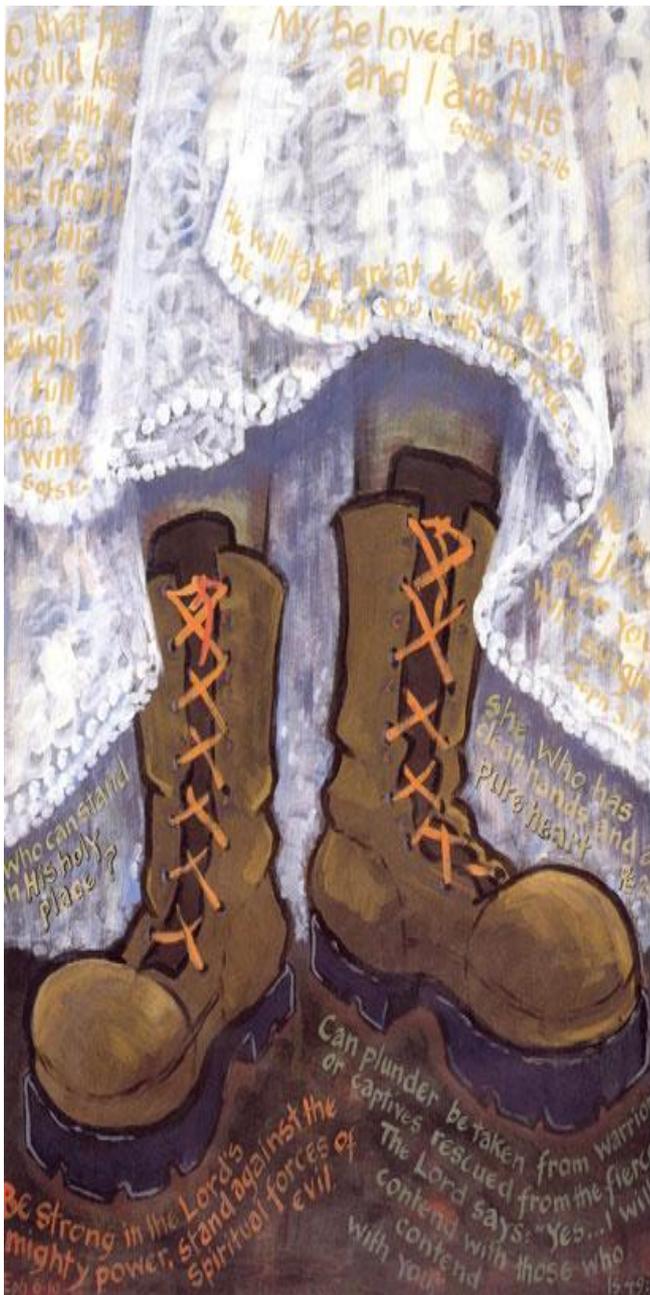
I came across an interesting analogy in yesterday's newspaper in an article entitled "Pushy parents tip kids over the edge." The journalist wrote "Screaming at children who are trying to find their way in sport is more likely to make them want to quit." Gary Lineker said in an interview that had felt the need to step in to speak to fathers on the touchline at kids' football matches, to ask them to calm down and stop harassing their own child, or risk turning them off sport for life. If we've taken children to sports or dancing or anything remotely competitive then we have probably seen parents like this.

God wants to equip his church with every good thing to further his kingdom and reach the lost, not to turn people away, turn them off.

Nevertheless the church must be tough in this day and age and in this post-Christian society. We must be prepared to fight the good fight in order to survive, not just to mark time but to expand and grow. People can be uncertain in a time of vacancy as a new minister is sought. The timescale is unknown. Some can become despondent and disheartened. But be reassured that God still wants to give us much more than we ask for or even imagine, even and perhaps moreso in vacancy.

Going back to the picture of the church as the bride of Christ. The bride might look calm and serene through her wedding day but when it comes time for the ceilidh in the evening, time for action, she hitches up her skirts, ties up the train and is ready for an Orcadian Strip the Willow!

That is the picture the church needs today. In fact, I was given a picture by a friend recently that illustrates this beautifully – or maybe not beautifully but very practically! The wedding dress is hitched up at the front to reveal, not white satin slippers but laced up tackety boots! The painting by Mandy Patterson is called "Portrait of the Church – the Bride in Combat Boots" and she painted it at a Lydia National Prayer Conference in 2001.



THE BRIDE IN COMBAT BOOTS – Portrait of the Church
Acrylic on paper on board 60 x 85cm 2001 (NFS)

This is an attempt to illustrate how the church should appear. Firstly as the beloved bride of Christ, the one He so extraordinarily came to claim, save and draw into His very heart. (Ephes 5:23-28). Secondly as one who needs to attain the characteristics of those who may be accepted into presence of a holy God. Thirdly as one who, as a member of God's family, has been equipped to take on spiritual battles and spread God's light and power into the dark places where suffering people feel captured.

Woven into the dress are some bridal love-verses, messages between the beloved and the God of love. The Bible is scattered with such 'sweet nothings'. Song of Songs 1:2, 2:16, Zephaniah 3:17 etc

Under the skirt is a reference to Psalm 24 which reminds us of the state we should be in as we approach our Lord. "Who can stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (v3). I.e. don't get caught out wearing dirty underwear!

The bride is dressed for combat because there is a battle on and God's people are required to engage with the enemy and take God's love and power wherever He commands. So in the mud of the real world we find messages to challenge and encourage us as we take action. "Be strong in the Lord's mighty power. Stand against the spiritual forces of evil." Ephes 6:10 "Can plunder be taken from warriors or captives and rescued from the fierce? The Lord says 'Yes ... I will contend with those who contend with you.'" Isaiah 49:24

This painting is an attempt to challenge believers to understand that while they are very much the beloved of God there is work to be done for which we have been provided with the necessary equipment. Salvation has to be worked out in a real, dark, mucky world where needy people perish. But we cannot proceed into battle without the strength-giving knowledge of who we are in God. It is our very identity as the "Bride" that gives us the confidence and authority to engage with difficulties and dark forces of evil.

Thanks be to God!

Let us put on our combat boots during this time of vacancy. As we said several times at the outset, the manse is the only place that is vacant; the church is not vacant so let us not act as if the Holy Spirit has gone into some kind of vacancy hibernation!

The holiday club is well prepared for the 60 or so children who will attend with an excellent team of enthusiastic and creative leaders. All the Enerj leaders are in the holiday club team so there will be good opportunities to get to know the children and build bridges into Enerj.

We will be saying a big thank you in June to five ladies who are retiring from lunch club after many years of faithful service and I am confident that five or more new people will feel called to step into their places so that this popular outreach can continue.

The Break will increase after the summer from monthly to twice a month, in other words every time the lunch club is on. And there is a growing team of people willing to lead this short time of worship.

Our trip to Scoughall near Dunbar in June will be by bus this year thanks to Enerj's fundraising efforts and your generosity at their silent auction. This is not a children's outing, it is for the whole church family, a time for all ages to get together, to get to know new people, a time for fellowship and some fun.

We need to ask God for more and more and more of his holy spirit in the work of our church, more and more of his power, asking in the total belief that God will provide.

How do we ask? Well, the answer to that question is tucked away in verse 14 of Ephesians 3 – to harness the power of heaven Paul says **“For this reason I kneel before the Father from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner dwelling so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”**

Paul sets an example of a deep and wonderful prayer life from which the blessings of heaven pour. God wants to give us everything, he holds nothing back if we ask for what we need to do the work of his kingdom on earth. Ask with confidence, with expectancy.

A church in Edinburgh has a new minster and it has been decided that there will be a prayer time in church every Wednesday evening to seek God's guidance in how the mission of the church should develop. 60 people turn up for the meeting. After some worship songs, people pray.....and things happen. God lays it on the hearts of individuals to pray for certain things, others hear and might think “That sounds like an exciting idea” and more pray about it. For example, one man has had a passion to use an empty shop unit for outreach in the community and that idea is growing and taking shape during the prayer time.

I will finish with our last two verses, the end of Paul's prayer –

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or even imagine, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen!