

Year B

Ephesians 1:3-14

Albert Einstein gave grudging acceptance to "the necessity for a beginning" and eventually, to "the presence of a superior reasoning power," but never did he accept the doctrine of a personal God. Two specific obstacles blocked his way. According to his journal writings, Einstein wrestled with a deeply felt bitterness toward the clergy, toward priests in particular, and with his inability to resolve the paradox of God's omnipotence and man's responsibility for his

choices. "If this being is omnipotent, then every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also His work; how is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thoughts before such an almighty being? In giving out punishment and rewards He would to a certain extent be passing judgment on Himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to Him?" Seeing no solution to this paradox, Einstein, like many other powerful intellects through the

centuries, ruled out the existence of a personal God.¹

The story is told of a group of theologians who were discussing the tension between predestination and free will. Things became so heated that the group broke up into two opposing factions.

But one man, not knowing which to join, stood for a moment trying to decide. At last he joined the predestination group. "Who sent you here?" they asked. "No one sent me," he replied. "I came of my own free will."

¹ Ross, Hugh 1991 *The Finger of God*, Promise Pub, p. 59.

"Free will!" they exclaimed. "You can't join us! You belong with the other group!"

So he followed their orders and went to the other clique. There someone asked, "When did you decide to join us?" The young man replied, "Well, I didn't really decide--I was sent here." "Sent here!" they shouted. "You can't join us unless you have decided by your own free will!"²

Such are the tangles we are capable of getting ourselves in as we receive in so many different ways the beautiful doctrine of election that is presented to us in the

² Today In The Word, August, 1989, p. 35.

passage from Ephesians. It is sometimes called the doctrine of predestination. The conundrum that Albert Einstein articulated has come to dominate discussion of the teaching. I would like to suggest to you today that a failure to read the text that is in front of us, for what it is, has caused the problem. You will find no angst over the divine sovereignty / free will issue here. You will read nothing of a predestination to destruction that has bothered so many. Instead we read a beautiful articulation of the love of God in action. We read about the wonder of God's grace; about the sovereignty

of his will; about the new family that we are now included in and about the call to follow the way of the family head, Jesus. The little expression, 'in Christ', or 'in him' occurs throughout the passage and, in fact, throughout Ephesians. This is the key to understanding how our election works. It takes the focus away from ourselves. We are not of prime importance. Sometimes we live our lives as if the world revolved around us or as if the world owed us something. But such is the groundedness of Ephesians; such is its orientation towards God, it will not let us become self-obsessed. Therefore we will

not be distracted by the debate on God's sovereignty versus free will. Instead we will worship God and when we do that we will have understanding. That's what gives Ephesians its particular distinctive flavour. Recently I completed a series of Bible studies in the manse on Ephesians and I made the point that I don't believe that Ephesians is a letter but instead that it is like a sermon, written by Paul, (I do believe in his authorship of it), with the intention of drawing the people into the worship of God. When we worship God we begin to see things

from his perspective and we then are able to reflect on what it means to be 'in Christ'.

To be 'in Christ' means that Jesus is the only one who is elect and that he alone is the electing God and the elected human. To be the elected human means that he must be the rejected human as well, and so identifying with all of us in our rejection invites us to receive his election and become part of his family. It is all about Jesus.

The most powerful gift that we have to practically demonstrate all of this is baptism. That's one of the reasons for the sacraments: that we are able to see, to touch and feel this

grace, this election of God, because otherwise it all can become so remote and difficult. In baptism we receive the invitation of God to present ourselves or our loved ones to receive his grace. He invites; he brings the blessing. It has nothing to do with us. We are simply called to accept it with thanksgiving, in worshipful thanks to a God who is like that. It is the Spirit of Christ, the elector and the elected one, who brings us into him.

Mark was an 11 year old orphan who lived with his aunt, a bitter middle aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for

her dead sister's son. She never failed to remind young Mark, if it hadn't been for her generosity, he would be a vagrant, homeless waif. Still, with all the scolding and chilliness at home, he was a sweet and gentle child.

Mark's schoolteacher had not noticed him particularly until he began staying after class each day (at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger, she later found) to help her straighten up the room. They did this quietly and comfortably, not speaking much, but enjoying the solitude of that hour of the day. When they did talk, Mark spoke mostly of his mother. Though he was quite small when she

died, he remembered a kind, gentle, loving woman, who always spent much time with him.

As Christmas drew near however, Mark failed to stay after school each day. His teacher looked forward to his coming, and when the days passed and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, she stopped him one afternoon and asked why he no longer helped her in the room. She told him how she had missed him, and his large grey eyes lit up eagerly as he replied, “Did you really miss me?”

Mark's teacher explained how he had been her best helper. "I was making you a surprise," he whispered confidentially. "It's for Christmas." With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room. He didn't stay after school any more after that.

Finally came the last school day before Christmas. Mark crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back. "I have your present," he said timidly when his teacher looked up. "I hope you like it." He held out his hands, and there lying in his small palms was a tiny wooden box.

“Its beautiful, Mark. Is there something in it?” I asked opening the top to look inside.

“Oh you can’t see what’s in it,” he replied, “and you can’t touch it, or taste it or feel it, but mother always said it makes you feel good all the time, warm on cold nights, and safe when you’re all alone.”

I gazed into the empty box. “What is it Mark,” I asked gently, “that will make me feel so good?”

“It’s love,” he whispered softly, “and mother always said it’s best when you give it away.”

And he turned and quietly left the room.

We are asked to trust that love which we cannot pin down. It is not possible to analyse it without destroying it; that's what happened to Albert Einstein, from the opening illustration today. The love of Jesus is a love that is given away in total loss. We must simply receive it as we worship the God who has elected us his children in Christ Jesus. Amen.