
Hymns: **83** **“Praise my soul the King of Heaven”**
 159 **“Not far beyond the sea nor high”**
 557 **“Let him to whom we now belong”**
 503 **“Love divine, all loves excelling”**

Reading: **Psalm 51**
 Ephesians 3:14-21

“MORE THAN WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE”

Margaret and I (with our friends and colleagues Kido & Seunghee) spent a couple of days in South Wales last week. On Monday we headed for the Western-most point of the Principality – to continue would need a hydro-plane as we headed for Ireland. On our way, I saw a signpost marked “Tenby”. And that five lettered word triggered an immediate memory. It’s where we used to go for our Sunday school outing. I remember as a child, with my closest ragamuffin friends, hogging the back seat of the bus. We’d eaten our lunch before we’d reached Carmarthen! And we sang “Show me the way to go home” with braggadocio, the very moment the bus began its journey. But there were other songs and I remember them too. Especially a chorus that had a couple of verses that ran in this way:

*I want that glory hallelujah feeling down in my heart....
I want that peace that passes understanding down in my heart.*

This yearning of the human heart built up till it reached a climax: “Glory to his name”.

After reading this morning’s passage from the letter to the Ephesians, want to add a third verse. It would run:

I want that love that passes knowledge planted down in my heart.

“The peace that passes understanding” is found in the letter to Philippians; today “it’s the love that surpasses knowledge” and it’s found in Ephesians. We’re told that we may hope to **know** the love of Christ that surpasses **knowledge**. In both instances (with peace and with love) we are at the very limits of what we call **knowledge** or **understanding**. That is, we can take the fruits of what we call in Europe “the Enlightenment” with its emphasis on Reason and suggest that we can experience a reality beyond it. There are those who want to subject everything to the laws of reason; they argue that all truth should be “verifiable” (that is, capable of a rational explanation); that there must be a logical case to make for any truth claim. To them, the idea that we can **know** something that lies beyond **knowledge** would be heresy.

But is it?

On Thursday last, with some old college friends, we attended an extraordinary piano recital by a young man (22 years of age) named Benjamin Grosvenor. It was a wondrous occasion. The piano came alive as if it wanted to display for us everything it was capable of. Hearts were touched. Tears came unbidden. We entered another plane of experience, another realm of existence.

Afterwards, we tried to explain the phenomenon we had just enjoyed. Surroundings were sumptuous – the Minster in Kings Lynn is a glorious building. We were part of an audience that was full of expectation, just like the congregation at Wesley's Chapel, sitting on the edge of its seats and open to the musical promptings that we were privileged to listen to. The choice of repertoire was uplifting. We were intrigued at the posture, the crouched position, of the soloist; his technique amazed us. One of our number, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, offered her musicological wisdom – she could tell us about structure and thematic development and musical “tricks of the trade”. And our discussions were coloured by our own friendships, our affection for each other, and our readiness to ask each other searching questions.

All of those factors played into our discussion. But we all knew that, in the last analysis, words were never going to capture the experience we were discussing. That isn't what words are for. In that recital, we had moved beyond the reach of words, we had **known** something beyond **knowledge**.

*Where Reason fails with all her powers
There Faith prevails and Love adores.*

Thus spake Isaac Watts; and, not to be outdone, here's how Charles Wesley put it:

*The things unknown to feeble sense,
Unseen by Reason's glimmering ray,
With strong, commanding evidence
Their heavenly origin display.*

And, if you can stomach the thought that we may **know** something beyond **knowledge**, then, I'd suggest, we've reached take-off time as we set off for modes of understanding that lie **beyond** understanding; as we enter into a relationship that will sustain us **beyond** our wildest imaginings.

People are beginning to talk about “space tourism”. Just compare for one moment the phenomenal cost of a journey into space with the knock-down price of a journey beyond knowledge and imagination.

Shelves of books have been written about the origins of Methodism. I've got half of them! But you'll need more than books to understand what happened in this square mile, between Aldersgate and Zinzendorf (the good Methodist's A to Z). Our little patch

of land includes the Foundery where Wesley began his work, the Tabernacle where George Whitfield preached his heart out, Moorfields and Kennington Common where the gospel was announced to huge crowds in the open air, where chains fell off and hearts were set free, where a pure celestial fire kindled a flame on many a mean human heart.

What happened in this blessed plot was fireworks, carnival, an inside-out experience; joy rose in the breast, lives were swept into another order of being, a new creation was being made whose explosive power, starting here, set the whole world alight.

Knowing what lies beyond knowledge, experiencing what lies beyond our wildest imagining, is the direct consequence, the immediate outcome, the amazing fruit of a relationship with Christ. That's the claim St Paul is bold to make. And it's the claim I feel bound to repeat today.

The Methodist Revival was dynamite, it was explosive, it was a depth-charge, a soul grenade. It took people out of themselves; or did it take people into themselves? United to Christ, there is a new creation. Then and, please God, now.

Once we'd passed that signpost to Tenby last week, we soon got to St David's, the smallest city in the UK, our ultimate destination. All around us as we drove west were other signposts pointing to places that reminded us of another explosive moment in history.

Elli, Illtyd, Teilo, Dewi. These were Celtic saints of Welsh provenance. Add to them Cedd, Ninian, Chad, Aiden, Patrick. And don't ever forget to include my favourite, Columbanus, who virtually single-handed spread learning and scholarship across northern Europe.

Our friend Professor Charles Burnett is one of the world's experts at describing the transmission of culture from the ancient classical world into Renaissance Europe through the medium of Islamic scholars. The Celtic saints represented another arm of that pincer movement which ultimately dragged Europe out of the Dark Ages.

We have a group of young people from an organisation known as Fusion here today. This Celtic explosion was not nuclear in the physical sense but it was in a spiritual sense. It brought the lives of humble people, as if they were atomic nuclei, into the same orbit and, out of the fusion that ensued fusion, was formed something that lay beyond calculus or mathematical projection. The sums didn't add up. There was a huge surplus of energy beyond what might have been expected of the coming together of such mean and lowly characters. The produced a knowing beyond knowledge, a power beyond imagining.

They reminded us that there are different ways of knowing, different paths to understanding. No-one is stupid enough to down play the importance of Science or rational approaches to problem-solving or explaining reality. But dim would he be of

soul who could suggest that Reason was the only way to register true meaning, to capture a full understanding of all that life throws at us.

I remember once, as a young minister, going out to visit one of my members. I followed my map, and somehow in the dark identified the house. I knocked on the door. No answer. I knocked again and again. Still no reply. In the end, I gave up. The following Sunday I chastised the person with whom I'd made an arrangement to come and visit him. "Where were you?" I asked. Alas! It transpired that I'd been knocking at the wrong door. And that's why no-one answered.

Those who suggest that Reason and Reason alone will account for all that constitutes human life are honourable people but sometimes they seem to me to be knocking on the wrong door, barking up the wrong tree. There are other ways of knowing, of experiencing what is the height and depth, the length and breadth of human experience, other ways of being filled with a fullness which we simply can't create or contain out of our own brains, of even our own imaginations. And these other ways add lustre to the intriguing task of enjoying as well as explaining human life.

One of Britain's foremost atheists, Professor A C Grayling, a man I've interviewed here in Wesley's Chapel, dismisses religion out of hand. To him it's all superstition and self-delusion. And yet, at one point in one of his books, he writes "our time should be counted in the throb of our hearts as we love and help, learn and strive, and make from our own talents whatever can increase the stock of the world's good". What a sentence! Take out the words "and make from our own talents" and you've got as good a statement of the Christian endeavour as anyone could possibly make. "It's in the throb of our hearts" that we find much more than ever is realised through the pulse of our brains alone.

Charles Wesley (again) put it in its finest way;

*Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place;
Till we cast our crowns before thee
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

It's the speechlessness of wonder, the reflection that emanates from love, and the rapture of praise that communicates that love which passes knowledge, that hope that lies beyond imagining.

One final word; I was knocking at the wrong door wasn't I? I chastised the home-owner who told me I'd been at the wrong address. He added a word. Because of my stupidity, I'd missed a grand dinner that was being cooked for me. Next time I'll get the right door.

Amen.