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Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

One of the interesting ideas about why Ephesians was written is that it was written to Gentiles at risk of jettisoning the discipline and doctrine of their Jewish Christian roots for something closer to the prevalent Gnostic worldview. What is important in this purpose is not what it was that attracted the Gentile Christians, but the focus of the writer on exhorting his or her readers to recognize and return to the historic grounding of the faith as present in the Jewish Christian community, and ultimately into Judaism itself. But it is also important in our understanding of how we relate, as individuals and communities, to the rest of the church.

As with a lot of exegesis reading this passage in this light falls on some detail – in this case the use of the personal pronouns – I, us, and you. The I is obviously the writer, and the you the Gentile Christian community in Ephesus. But who is us? It is obviously another group in communion with the writer.

Traditionally Ephesians has been understood to have been written by Paul, though there are many people who question this. In the context of Paul the 'us' is often understood to mean the missionary group working with him. But, the commentator I read this week, suggests that the 'us' is in fact the Jewish Christian community. And the focus is not so much encouragement and inspiration, as a call to come back to their historic roots.

In that context the prayer for wisdom and revelation is not about a sense of the presence of God as a recommitment to orthodox faith as revealed in the original community. If this is the case what then does this passage say to modern western Christians?

First of all it ought to remind us of Jesus' high priestly prayer when he prayed that we may be one even as Jesus and the Father were one. This unity is not simply a case of feeling united in one another, but of having a unity which reflects a shared heritage which stretches back two millennia to the first Jewish Christian community, and beyond that a further 1500 years into Judaism. It is a unity which calls us to take seriously this heritage in understanding the faith. We are not free to work it out on our own, but must do so with an eye to this tradition.

What is it that keeps us faithful to this deposit of faith which is our heritage? Is it the creeds? Is it our sense of unity with our brothers and sisters? Is it the Scriptures? Our sense of unity with our brothers and sisters, important though that is, is too loose – it does not bind us as clearly with those who have gone before us. And this is clearly what is intended. It is contained for us in creeds, in Scripture and in the theological tradition of the church.

But perhaps the biggest question for us as individuals is how much room does this give us to move? How tight is this tradition, this deposit of faith? Here we begin to enter the world of personal preference. For the writer of this letter is silent on this matter. He or she is simply exhorting the readers to be cognizant of this heritage. In other words, don't act as if what you think and say is solely drawn from your own relationship with God. Our life of faith is in fact a dialogue in which God, the community in which we live, and the Christian community throughout the ages are participants.

If we allow all these to enter the dialogue, if we listen to the lot, then we receive wisdom and revelation which lead us to the glorious inheritance laid out before us. But if we listen only to ourselves, we remain lost in the confusion of our own ignorance and deny ourselves that inheritance.

The writer of this letter was urgent, because he or she knew of the faith of the Ephesian community and did not want it to falter. We should hear that urgency and ask ourselves are we listening or are we at risk of faltering?