**Ephesians 3:14-21**

**God at work within us**

Today, we are beginning a series of sermons that will go through to Advent in December, and if you notice from the back of the pewsheet, the sermons all begin with the title ‘3:16’. What is that about?

Well, for some unknown reason – maybe God planned it this way or it may be coincidence – but so many of the really key verses in the Bible happen to be Chapter 3 verse 16 in their respective books, So we are going to spend the next few months looking at some of these 3:16 verses: today, it’s Ephesians 3:16, then 2 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, Matthew 3:16, John 3:16, Acts 3:16 and 2 Thessalonians 3:16. There are quite a few other 3:16s that we could choose too and perhaps, at a later date, we will come back to those. But these 3:16 verses seem to highlight some of the main and most crucial themes of the Christian faith, so its worth us spending a few months working through them.

And today, we start the series with Ephesians 3:16, which we’ve just heard read, where Paul says this: “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.”

Now, at first glance, that may not be a particularly amazing thing to read. But when you actually reflect on what Paul I saying here, it is in fact a completely life-transforming statement; something that has the ability to completely rock your world and transform the way in which you live.

“I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.”

Let’s think about that statement for a few minutes…

There was a brilliant little book written in the 1950s by J.B. Phillips called ‘Your God is too small’ and I really recommend you read it. And in that book, Phillips wrote this: "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs."

He was right. The God whom many of us believe in and rely on is too small: he’s not the real God, he’s not the God of the Christian faith who is spoken about in the Bible.

The God of the Bible is a God who created the world out of nothing, who chose the people Israel and worked miraculously through their history. The God of the Bible is one who has ultimate power and dominion over the whole of creation. The God of the Bible is one who raises the dead, who defeats death and sin on the cross. The God of the Bible is one who works miracles in the lives of many, and whose teaching and example has had the power to shape the history of humanity.

That’s the God of the Bible.

But the God that most of us believe in is a weak and distant deity: most of have an idea of a god who is disinterested in our lives and we don’t really expect that god to make a difference in our lives. When we pray to that god, for many of us, our prayers are more wishful thinking than anything else. And we come to church each Sunday not really expecting this little god to say anything to us or make a difference to us.

The god we think about most of the week lives in a little box, he’s very tame, and he never does anything particularly exciting and we don’t really expect him to. The god most of us relate to is very safe, very predictable and, if truth be known, a little bit boring…

J.B. Phillips was right: “Your God is too small”.

And, of course, if our understanding of God is too small, or we don’t really expect him to make a difference in our lives, then we are less able to draw on our faith when we experience change and chaos in our lives and in the world.

And in this moment in history, we really need to draw deep on the wells of faith and found ourselves firmly on the God who is in control of all things. Because there is so much change and chaos surrounding us at the moment:

The political landscape of this nation is experiencing turmoil to an extent that few, if any, of us can remember in our lifetimes; with the very principles of democracy and the very definition of parliamentary sovereignty coming into question to such a degree that even the Supreme Court is needing to make a judgment this week.

The fabric of our society is coming under threat through a rise in violent crime and increasing mental health issues that are manifesting themselves even on these streets of Enfield Town.

Advances in technology are impacting the way we communicate, and the way in which we digest news and fake news and information from around the globe. We are constantly responding to information and demands on us through e-mail and Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and phone calls and a whole host of other connected mediums.

And then you can add to that the stresses and strains of our every day lives: in the family, at work, with friends, the pressures of ill health or money issues or employment worries and so many other things…

The world is a truly beautiful place and life is to be cherished. But sometimes we feel very, very vulnerable and sometimes we feel crushed under the weight of it all.

And if our understanding of God is of a distant, weak being, and we have no real expectation that he can make a difference in our lives, then what is the point of our Christian faith? When we are at risk of losing ourselves due to the sheer pressure and chaos of life, what hope is there for us if we do not have any real expectancy of a God who can intervene and bring us healing and peace?

“Your God is too small” – and that has serious consequences on our lives…

If our God is too small, we will end up being consumed by emptiness and hopelessness and will just be swept along on an unhappy current; victims to the misfortunes of change and chance.

And it’s into this situation, this sense of uncertainty that Paul’s powerful words come, Ephesians 3:16: “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.”

This prayer of Paul to his readers is based firmly on the reality that our God is no small, is not distant, is not powerless but instead our God is mighty and engaged and all-powerful, and that the God whom we worship longs to not only engage with us but to empower us to face the changes and chances of this world.

“I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.”

Our God is a glorious God and, as his children, he wants to transform us from within so that we may know his power at work in our lives.

Paul doesn’t pray that we might *do the right things* or that we might *believe the right things* or that we might *behave in a certain way*. Paul prays that we may let go of ourselves and allow ourselves to be filled with the experience of the love and grace of God; that we may let go of ourselves and be filled with his presence.

Paul prays that if we are feeling empty, then God will fill us with joy.

Paul prays that if we are feeling weak, then God will give us strength.

Paul prays that if we are feeling all at sea, then God will be the rock to which we can cling.

The Christian faith is not a boring ritualism acted out for a distant, disinterested God. The Christian faith is laying claim to an inner spiritual power that can transform how we live.

And what is that inner spiritual power?

Is it positive thinking? No

Is it related to astrology and the alignment of the stars? No

Is it some untapped human strength that we need to discover? No

The inner spiritual power is God’s Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

When we give our lives over to Jesus, God sends his Holy Spirit to live in us and so God becomes the power at work in us. And the more we die to ourselves, the more space we allow for God to live in us.

That’s why, in Galatians 2:20, Paul writes this: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

That’s why Jesus says in Mark 8:35, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake…will save it.”

It’s a very simple transaction. We can try to carry on facing the chaos and struggles and temptations and pressures and anxieties of this world in our own strength. But we are weak and we will fail and we will be beaten…Or we can stop trying to rely on our own strength, we can stop thinking that we are strong enough to win the battles or saying that if we think positively enough, it’s all going to be OK or if the stars align right, then we will win at life. Stop trying to be strong enough, and die to self and allow God to be strong in us and for us…

…and then we will know to live with an inner power because the power is not our own – it is the power of God at work in us.

And what happens when we start to live in the power of the Holy Spirit? There are three things that we see in the Bible:

First, we can dream great dreams – and seem them come to fruition. If we live in the power of God’s Spirit, we are not chasing our own dreams and fantasies but instead, we are pursuing the will of God for our lives and his world. And if it’s God’s will that we dream of fulfilling, then it will come to pass…

Second, we can develop the power to carry the most enormous burdens in life. Many of us face circumstances and situations and we think, “I don’t have the strength to get through this”. But you don’t need to have that strength because God promises to be the strength for you. Didn’t Jesus say, “Come to me all who are weary and tired of carrying heavy burdens”? Because he promises to carry those burdens for us.

And third, if we allow God to be the power at work within us, we will be able to achieve far more than we ever dreamt possible. Because our God is a God of miracles and he wants to work his miracles in your life.

J.B. Phillips wrote this: "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs."

That’s not because a God who is big enough doesn’t exist.

He does.

The problem is that our God, very often, is too small. But our God, very often, isn’t the real God.

The real God, the God of the Christian faith, is one who wants to dwell within you and empower you to become the person you were destined to be, to fulfill the dreams and desires that accord to his will, to carry your burdens for you, and to achieve through you and in you more than you could ever have believed possible.

That’s our God.

So throw away your ideas of a God who is too small and build a relationship with the real and living God. And then you will be able to say “Amen” to the prayer that Paul writes in Ephesians 3:16: “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.”