

## Sermon for 18th July 2021 - (Andrea Ward)

### Ephesians 2:11-22 & Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I wonder if any of you enjoy doing family history research, finding out where your family originated, where you come from? Even if we haven't spent time looking at our family history, many of us will have family pictures or stories that have been passed down the generations. It can be fascinating looking at photos of earlier generations of our family, their different attire, seeing our likeness to them. It helps us appreciate our story and where we've come from and who we are today.

In today's passage from Ephesians 2, Paul begins by urging his readers to remember their spiritual story: to remember their origins, what they once were, as they enjoy their status as members of God's household, God's people today. Although our circumstances are very different to those addressed in this letter, for most of us who do not have Jewish heritage, and even for those of us who do, this passage is as relevant as it was 2000 years ago.

"Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised'.... remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:11-12).

Separate, excluded, foreigners - Paul's choice of words emphasises how cut off from God the Gentiles had been; a hopeless situation prior to Christ. And along with this chasm between them and God there was also a chasm between the Gentiles and the people of God, the Jews, which had led also to the hostility that Paul speaks about in verse 14.

No, it wasn't impossible for a Gentile to be received into the people of God, and indeed a part of God's call to his people was to be a light to the Gentiles. But when we read the Old Testament and the Gospel accounts it's clear that the antipathy between Jew and Gentile was enormous. The Samaritans and the Jews, for example, hated one another (think of Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, and how shocking this was to his Jewish listeners; and the raised eyebrows of the disciples when they discovered Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman at the well). The hostility that Paul talks about between Jew and Gentile was very, very real. Jews and Gentiles were separated by divergent cultures and convictions, and suspicion of one another. A huge chasm that must have seemed impossible to bridge.

Paul speaks in verse 14 about Christ coming to destroy the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile. And later he speaks of how in and through Christ, the two have been made one to become a holy temple in the Lord. We can only appreciate the true meaning and significance of this dividing wall and the reference to becoming a holy temple, if we appreciate the way in which the Temple in Jerusalem was built. John Stott, Anglican priest and commentator explains it as follows:

"The three courts - for the priests, the lay men and the lay men of Israel respectively - were all on the same elevation as the temple itself. From this level one descended five steps to a walled platform, and then on the other side of the wall fourteen more steps to another wall, beyond which was the Outer Court or court of the Gentiles.....From any part of it the Gentiles could look up and view the temple, but were not allowed to approach it. They were cut off from it by the surrounding wall, which was a one and a half metre stone barricade. on which at were displayed at intervals warning notices....During the last hundred years or so, two of the Greek notices have been discovered, one in 1871 and the other in 1935. The former.....is a white limestone slab measuring nearly a metre across. Its exact wording is as follows: "No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."

Paul's choice of this physical symbol would have been a powerful reminder for his readers of their complete alienation from God and the people of God. The thought that the two could be joined together in mutual harmony and love would have been.....well, unthinkable. And the huge debates that are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, over how the Gentiles could be welcomed as part of God's people, reminds us how in the early days of the church, the apostles were still trying to get their heads around such an enormous shift in their thinking: Jesus Christ wasn't just their Lord and Saviour, but Lord and Saviour of all people.

So, "remember" Paul says twice - remember what your situation was before Christ!

If we've been a Christian for a long time, we can forget our story and just how extraordinary it is that we are who we are today. It's important to reflect and to remember where we have come from, and who we would be now without Christ:

That without God's love for the world, without the Lord Jesus's sacrificial love for us, without the gracious and personal work in us by the Holy Spirit, we would be without any hope and without any way of accessing God. Without Jesus, we would still be standing in that outer court, looking up longingly at what could never be ours.

I love the words of the Communion Prayer / Eucharistic Prayer D, which begins with the story of Jesus touching untouchables with love (did we not hear of his healing ministry to his people in this morning gospel reading) and celebrating the freedom of his people on the night of Passover. The response in the liturgy is: "This is his story: this is our song". But then as the prayer moves into describing how Jesus offered his body and blood on the cross, we are invited into his and their story and the response changes to: "This is our story: this is our song". Yes! We who were once far away, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. We can now enter not just the courts of the priests, and lay men and women, but with them we can now enter the inner sanctuary of the Temple - we can draw close to God, be in his very presence. All this and the wonderful spiritual blessings that Brian was preaching about last week are ours through Christ giving up his body on the cross to reconcile us to God.

Reconciled to God. And reconciled to others. Paul says,

"For he (Christ) himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."

Christ's purpose was to create in himself one new humanity! In him the wall has come down that separated Gentiles from God, and the wall has come down that separated Gentiles and Jews. The Old Covenant for one people had been replaced and now it was through the very body of Jesus, given over to death on the cross, that the two could become one. Jesus is the supreme leveller, the one in whom our differences become secondary to our common condition: sinners gloriously redeemed through his saving love. As Paul reminds us in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Faith in Christ is the ultimate leveller.

We shall see the fullness of this great truth when we share in that glorious inheritance that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 1, that is our eternal destiny. But, how about this "one new humanity" here on earth? It is already a reality spiritually: the work has been completed through Christ's death and resurrection. But there's also the ongoing challenge of bringing this kingdom reality here on earth: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven".

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5 talks about us having been given the ministry of reconciliation. How do we, who have experienced all the benefits and blessings of Christ's ministry of reconciliation, be those who live that message of reconciliation? We who were once far away and who have

received Christ's peace, are called to reach out to those who are still far away and need Christ's peace.

Sadly, the church down the centuries hasn't been always been the beacon of light, love and peace that Christ called and calls us to be. Down the centuries the church has failed to show the reconciling love of Christ to Jews, has failed to protect and stand with them and indeed, others.. And it is so easy to allow the differences in our identity to separate us from others, instead of our core identity - sinners gloriously saved by Christ - leading and guiding the way we treat others. Our perspective can so easily be a worldly one rather than a spiritual one in which ethnicity, gender, nationality, language, social status etc affect our welcome of others. I wonder who those people might be for you? Are there groups of people that you're aware you don't naturally welcome?

As those who are so much a work in progress, we find this so challenging! So, we need to keep drawing on the story of Jesus, the Reconciler, to help us follow in his way. Jesus, who again and again crossed religious, cultural and political boundaries to bring his good news to others, to those on the margins, to those who were traditionally excluded (Gentiles, Samaritans, women, tax collectors, lepers, sinners) welcoming them into fellowship with himself and therefore with God's people.

"In him (Christ) the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a building in which God lives by his Spirit" (verses 21-22). You are being built together. We are being built together. We are a work in progress. We're under construction; we are being changed by the Holy Spirit, which means that we can keep growing to become more like Christ in how we see others and how we welcome others, learning to cross boundaries and bring down the walls that can so easily divide us from others.

As we seek to follow in Jesus's work of reconciliation, let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us see others and treat others in the way that Jesus did, both in our individual witness and in our witness as the people of God, the church. And as we do so, we will experience in greater and greater measure what it means to be that holy temple in the Lord, that dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.