

TOPPLING THE WALL

Ephesians 2:11-22

Last week Giles taught us how the first part of chapter 2 of Ephesians tells us that we are saved by faith in Christ. The second part of chapter 2 tells us that Christ unites us both with each other and with God. If I wanted to choose a short phrase to summarise what our reading today is saying to us, I would choose either “A single new humanity” or “Toppling the Wall” and we’re going to be looking at both those themes in a moment. If you’d like to follow in your own Bibles as we study this passage together, please open them at page [***] – but in any case I’m going to put the relevant verses up on the screen.

Paul starts off by talking about separation and distancing, what these days we’d call alienation. That’s a popular word in contemporary society where people in the developed world are disillusioned with the failure of society and government to deliver what has been promised and what they think they want. Ordinary people feel powerless to change things, they feel they can’t influence political processes. People, especially the young, are fed up with the “system”.

But Paul is speaking of a different kind of alienation, he’s speaking of alienation from God and alienation from our fellow creatures. In Paul’s day, Jews were deeply alienated from Gentiles. Jews despised Gentiles. Jews thanked God every day that they had not been born as Gentiles. A Jew would not enter a Gentile home. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was deemed the equivalent of death. Some ancient Jewish writings refer to Gentiles as “fuel for the fires of hell” – that’s how much they despised them.

Paul says Gentiles used to be alienated or excluded from citizenship in Israel and alienated from God’s covenant promises. Look at verses 11 and 12:

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) – 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 NIV)

Paul exhorts the Gentiles to *remember* their pre-Christian past from a different viewpoint. Paul wants them to appreciate the mighty reversal Christ has brought about on their behalf – we all need to remember the terrible spiritual condition from which Christ has rescued us. Although I’ve tried to give you some of the flavour of it, it’s difficult for us to relate to the alienation between Jews and Gentiles today. Perhaps we can imagine it in terms of different kinds of alienation which do exist today – alienation between male and female, between black and white, and between rich and poor.

Also Gentiles were uncircumcised, they lacked the circumcission sign of the covenant between God and his chosen people, and so in Jewish eyes were alienated from God – in Jewish eyes they were not only outside citizenship in Israel, but outside God’s covenant promises. But, Paul makes it clear that the Jewish circumcision was only a circumcision “so called” – it was merely human and stood in contrast to the work of God. It was not the true circumcision or cleansing of the heart for which God looked from his people as the verses on screen show (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

But, unlike the Jews or today’s politicians, Paul offers real hope, he speaks of reconciliation, look at verse 13:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:13 NIV)

The new order in Christ has changed the whole situation, alienation has given way to reconciliation and hostility has given way to peace. Gentiles who were once far away from God have now been brought near, they’ve been reconciled with God through Christ’s blood – those of you were here for the introduction to Ephesians will remember that

chapter 1 and verse 7 told us that we were redeemed and forgiven through Christ's blood. There are no preconditions here, no requirement to be circumcised or to do good works. Everything has been accomplished through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Our forgiveness and redemption are accomplished in the blood of Christ for those who accept his redeeming work simply by turning to him in faith.

But Christ's blood is relevant for the Jews too – in fact it's what unites Jews and Gentiles and brings all into a new relationship with God. Look at verses 14 to 18:

“For he [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:14-18 NIV)

Not only has Christ's death reconciled all people to God, it's also reconciled all people to each other. All traditional barriers have been overcome and done away with through Christ, all divisions and separations are healed and reconciled in him. This idea of a barrier between Jews and Gentiles must have spoken loudly to Paul, because he writes this letter from prison in Rome accused of the crime of taking Gentiles into the Jerusalem Temple through the physical barrier which excluded them. This barrier was a feature of the magnificent temple built in Jerusalem by Herod the Great. The Temple itself was constructed on an elevated platform. 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 of the Temple or the 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 were displayed at intervals warning notices in Greek and Latin. They read, in effect, not ‘Trespassers will be prosecuted’ but ‘Trespassers will be executed.’

Further, Christ has not only made peace, he IS our peace. It is in him, united with him as members of his body, that we enjoy that peace. Christ has transcended the division between Jew and Gentile, indeed he has transcended all divisions between all peoples for those who are his and belong to the body of believers.

The law, as law, is done away with through the new covenant established in Christ’s blood – but God’s moral values and moral requirements contained in the law remain; and the righteousness which is required of us is to be realised even more fully through the inner enabling of the Holy Spirit. But the law as a written code, threatening death instead of imparting life, is done away with in Christ, and when the law is done away with the barrier between Gentiles and Jews is removed.

By his death Christ has done away with the law, in order not only to make Jew and Gentile into one new person (verse 15), but also to reconcile them both in one body, both to each other and to God. Generally, Paul; teaches that reconciliation with God is through the grace of God. In verse 16, it is Christ who does the reconciling. We are reconciled to God and that is what Christ has done.

The word which God sent to Israel began to be available in the Gentile world also, through the preaching of Peter, Paul and other apostles. Verse 17 tells us that Christ himself was the preacher who has brought the gospel message to all – for it is through Christ that we all have access to the Father as verse 18 tells us. There are no distinctions, we all stand in his presence as one family. This new unity through and in Christ does much more than span the Jew-Gentile divide. As Paul says elsewhere, there are no sexual and social distinctions. ‘Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all.’ (Colossians 3:11) and, ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for

you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ (Galatians 3:28). Not that the facts of the differences between us are not removed. Men remain men and women remain women. Jews remain Jews and Gentiles remain Gentiles. But inequality before God is abolished and it needs to be abolished in our eyes also. There is a new unity in Christ.

Paul then goes on to tell us that we are fellow citizens and members of the house of God – look at verses 19 to 22:

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him 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 dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-22 NIV)

The first Gentile believers must have felt ill at ease in churches with a Jewish base, but Paul says they should be completely at home. We are all children in God’s family. Christ’s work on the cross has changed everything, now everyone belongs in a way they never did before. Let us welcome strangers and aliens into our church and have full fellowship with them. As Paul says, we are all members of God’s household.

This household, this family, is built on Christ as its foundation, its cornerstone. The body of Christ is built on him as its sure foundation and the position of all the other parts of the structure are determined by him. Here Paul is probably thinking of Isaiah 28:16. Not only does Christ bond the structure together, he is also the stone of testing – testing us to see if we conform to the specifications of the architect, Christ our Lord.

In Christ the whole building of the church of God is joined together and each part is allotted its proper place. Christ is an indispensable part of the church and it functions only in relation to him. If the apostles and prophets were the foundation members of this living sanctuary and other Jewish believers were among the earliest “stones” built into its fabric, the situation now was that Gentile believers (the

“you too” of verse 22) were being added to the structure, in constantly increasing numbers. Indeed the building is still under construction. What a magnificent change has occurred in our situation. Once we were separated from God, outside the covenant community, without God and without hope (vv. 11, 12) now we are being built into the dwelling place of God himself.

The new community, God’s fellowship of reconciliation, transcends all distinctions of race, status, and sex. Let us always remember that in our own church community. Properly oriented to the one cornerstone, based on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Gentile Christians, along with their fellow-believers of Jewish birth, belonged equally to God’s holy house. So, in the same way, everyone from every tribe, nation and background fully belongs here in God’s holy church in Cannes.

Remember Paul talked about the dividing wall of hostility (verse 14). Near the beginning of his famous poem “Mending Wall”, the poet Robert Frost said “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” – he’s questioning why the main characters in his poem need a wall between them and the rest of the world in the first place. Well God doesn’t love the walls we construct between each other and he hates even more the walls we allow to exist between us and him. In verse 12 Paul calls us to “remember” the wall, to remember our separation from Christ. So let us topple the walls of fear and hatred that alienate us from our fellows and let us take the remedy of the cross, turning to Christ in repentance and faith in his sacrificial death and resurrection to bring down the wall of separation, the dividing wall of hostility, between us and God, so that we may be fully reconciled to our Father. We can remain behind the wall of sin and separation or turn to the only one who can demolish that wall. Remember, if we don’t do that we face eternal separation from God, separated from him by the solid wall of our sin and the solid wall of our unbelief – but once we turn to Christ in repentance and faith nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39). So if you’ve never done that, do it now today before it’s too late.

