

ATTITUDES TO RACE

Ephesians 2:11-16 and John 11:49-52

In Jesus's time there was a bitter divide between Jews and non-Jews, between the Jewish race and the non-Jews, the Gentiles – as we saw from our reading from Ephesians – and we're going to look at this issue of race and religion this morning. You can find the reading from Ephesians on page [***] of the church Bibles, but I'm going to refer to other scripture as well and all that will be projected on the screen behind me.

Paul speaks about the bitter divide between Jews and Gentiles, Jews called Gentiles 'dogs' – an animal despised by the Jews. A great wall separated Jews and Gentiles in the first century AD. This was not only a symbolic division, but a real wall, a part of the Jerusalem Temple.

The temple of Jerusalem in Jesus's day was a truly magnificent structure, the largest structure of its kind in the ancient world. It bordered on the Kidron valley in the east and on the Tyropean valley in the west, abutted the old city of David in the south and the fortress of Antonia in the north, altogether occupying an area of some 17,000 sq. metres, more than a dozen football fields. It was not a square or rectangular area, but trapezoidal, with the north and west sides being longer than the south and east, you can see what it looked like on the slide.

The platform of the temple area was supported by massive walls that contained the huge quantity of rubble that had been used to flatten the site as well as supporting the great weight of the temple itself. These walls descended more than 50 feet below the level of the street, rested on bedrock, and ascended more than 80 feet above the level of the street. Some of the stones of that wall still visible today are more than 40 feet long and weigh more than 100 tons. If we are to believe the account of Josephus, the Jewish Roman historian, many larger stones were originally incorporated.

This temple was the result of continual building and restoration. After Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC, it was rebuilt by the returning exiles in 538 BC. This reconstruction was continuously modified, but the most important work occurred under the rule of Herod the Great. In 20 BC he commenced a massive rebuilding programme involving 10,000 workmen, 1,000 wagons and 1,000 priests. This rebuilding continued until shortly before its destruction in 70 AD.

The temple was mostly covered with gold and what was not gold was bright white stone. The roof consisted of gold spikes to prevent birds from defiling it. It was truly magnificent. But it was a divisive structure.

Access to the temple was via numerous gates. Each gate led into a large area called the court of the Gentiles, which made up most of the temple area. In the middle of the temple area was a stone balustrade, about four and a half feet high, which led into the temple proper as you can see from the slide. All the gates through this balustrade into the inner part of the temple had inscriptions warning non-Jews that they were prohibited upon pain of death from entering. And this was no idle threat, there were Temple police to enforce this law.

As one progressed inwards the division by sex and tribe continued. After passing the balustrade were 14 steps leading to another 35 foot high wall. Nine gates in this wall gave access to the inner temple courtyard area. The eastern third of this courtyard was the women's court, the larger western part was called the court of Israel which was the men's court. Women were only allowed as far as their own courtyard. From the court of Israel those of the tribe of Levi could enter the court of priests (which contained the altar of burnt offering) and the temple proper. This consisted of a porch leading into the temple, the holy place and the holy of holies which could only be entered by the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement.

To put this in plainer terms the closer one approached the inner parts of the Temple the fewer people were allowed. Much of the splendour of the Temple could only be enjoyed from a distance by those who were not Jewish. The dividing wall was a constant reminder of the division and separation that existed between the Jews and the rest of the world. Jews regarded all non-Jews as unclean inferior beings who were not to be associated with.

But Paul tells us in our reading from Ephesians that in Christ the walls of prejudice and separation have been broken down – look at verse 14:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,” (Ephesians 2:14 NIV)

Christ didn't literally knock down the stone balustrade that we just mentioned – that wouldn't happen until the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70AD. But, Christ has united us and made us part of a greater Temple, a Temple built not of stone but of flesh. This new Temple is the church, those who have become followers of Christ – including us here today. The Temple is no longer a physical building, it's us! We are God's Temple and there should be no dividing walls between us once we turn to Christ and accept him.

This wasn't easy for the earliest Christians, even early Christian leaders – who we must remember were all Jews. Peter had to be shocked by a vision of eating unclean foods to make him re-examine his attitudes – but he did realise that the walls between Gentiles and Jews had come down – listen to what he says to the Gentile Cornelius when Peter visited him:

“Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard

your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." Then Peter began to speak: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." (Acts 10:27-35 NIV)

This is, of course, the logical consequence of the fact that mankind was initially created by God and we are all descendants of Adam and Eve, the couple that God initially created.

Paul tells us that when we are living with our God in heaven there will be absolutely no distinction between us on the basis of race or of what we were in this earthly life:

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28 NIV)

and this is confirmed by the book of Revelation:

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands." (Revelation 7:9 NIV)

But what about us today? What kind of walls do we have up? What kind of walls do we need to tear down? Is our wall a tradition that is not appropriate any more? Is our wall an attitude that keeps people alienated?

Do we have a heart sign up that says no black people allowed; no poor people welcome; no broken English in this building; you must dress appropriately; divorcees and single parents are second class; women are inferior; kids are too loud; this my reserved seat, you better move; this is my church and it won't change.

Paul encouraged the Gentile Christians by reminding them that they were no longer foreigners but members of God's household:
"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household,"
(Ephesians 2:19 NIV)

We're members of God's household because through the death of Christ on the cross we are a new creation, we're forgiven all our sins and justified or made righteous and so reconciled to God. As Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians:

"So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:16-19 NIV)

and as Paul says in his letter to the Colossians:

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—" (Colossians 1:19-22 NIV)

We're all God's children (Romans 8:16), members of his household, so there must be no dividing walls between us. If we have erected walls between us and other Christians let us start to dismantle them. We may need to dismantle some things slowly, other things may need a bulldozer. We need to achieve God's will for us, to live in the way he wants and intends us to live – in full harmony, fellowship and unity with one another as his children. As it says in the opening verses of our reading from Ephesians let us remember the terrible

hopeless state from which we have been rescued by the love of God expressing itself through Christ:

“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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:11-13 NIV)

The Gentiles were outside God’s saving purposes until they accepted Christ and equally we are all outside God’s saving purposes until we turn to Christ. Appreciating the hopeless state from which we have been rescued should motivate us to treasure our salvation all the more.

The walls that once divided us were brought down because of God’s love for us. The love that sent Jesus to die for us on the cross and so enable us to be reconciled to God and become a part of his household. That love for us from God should motivate us to love each other and break down the barriers that divide us – the walls of our petty opinions and prejudices. We need to first tear down the bad bricks of the walls in our own hearts before we try and re-arrange the bricks in the lives of others. Reconstruction needs to begin in our own hearts. Work on yourself and then pray for others. Let God’s love mend your heart and then ask him to fill your heart with love for others. Learn at the feet of Jesus and allow him to use you to reach out to others as you open your heart to his love. To reach out to others irrespective of their race or situation or background and bring them into God’s kingdom and reconcile them both to God and to ourselves.

Father, I pray that as we go out from here this morning, you’ll give us all your love for others so that we can reach out to all people of every nation and from every situation and every walk of life and bring them to a saving faith in you.