

The Church of Jesus Christ is a pretty amazing place as we have been seeing through the autumn. We have seen that in this church here in Chineham we are very different people in terms of our culture and our background. We are of different ages and sexes. We are different in where we are on our journey of faith. Yet, amazingly despite all these differences, we are one!

This is what we have been looking at over recent weeks and we have seen the following:

Romans 12:5, "so in Christ we who are many form one body".

1 Peter 2:5, "you are being built into a (that is one) spiritual house".

Romans 15:6, "so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is how the Bible presents the church, as one people, one body, one family. With that in mind we have been thinking together about what we are called by God to do as we work together to create, enable and develop that unity.

So we have looked at recognising that unity, even though we come from many different nationalities. We may not sing the same national anthem but we have one new song! We have looked at how we can accept each other in the family of God even though we have different view points, at how we can repair relationships that have been damaged by sin, at how we build our unity through sharing Communion and a couple of weeks ago some of us thought about how we build unity as we pray for all the saints. If you missed it check it out on the website.

All these are things we can do to create, enable and develop unity. However, as we draw the series to a close, today we focus on God's desire and action through which he creates, enables and develops the unity of his church.

To do that we go to Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus and to 2:11-22.

Ephesus is in modern day Turkey. When Paul visited it and wrote to it, it was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. It was a multi-cultural and multi-faith city. The church reflected that and it had at its heart one huge division. This was that some members of the church had come from a Jewish background and some from a non-Jewish or Gentile background.

1. The big issue v11-12

This was the big issue in the church in Ephesus, what Paul describes in v14 as "the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (v14). The two groups were separated and it was not an easy or pleasant separation. We see that in v11 where he says you gentiles are "called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision". You can sense the sniping and derogatory nature of the comments. Those from the Jewish background looked down on the gentile converts and felt they didn't belong.

V12 presents a bleak picture of these gentile Christians being outside the people of God and cut off from God himself. They didn't belong. Perhaps there are some sitting here this morning who are thinking I'm not sure I belong here. You may be new or you may feel that you are not yet a follower of Christ.

When I was about 16 I went for the first time to a church with some friends. They were regulars and had invited me. We went in through some doors and they rushed off upstairs. Thinking they'd gone to the toilet or something, I walked on ahead into the church and sat down. After a few minutes one of them came to me and said they were all sitting in the gallery upstairs wondering where I was. At that point I was not part of it. I was an outsider.

That is where we were also before we became Christians and if you are not yet a follower of Christ then this is the reality of your situation.

In Ephesus the Christians from a gentile background were made to feel outsiders. We may recognise the differences created by our backgrounds but this was something very different and a much greater barrier. It was a huge barrier and a difficult one to break down. If you had grown up in a Jewish home despising the "uncircumcised" and told you should have nothing to do with them, then it would have been hard to accept them as part of God's family. Similarly if you had been raised with disdain for the Jews and their exclusivity then it would be hard to feel you belonged with them. This was the big issue in Ephesus. However God had done something about it.

2. The new creation v13-18

Things had changed. Paul had been writing about what they were, what they had been but with v13 he changes tense, "But now, in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Jesus."

In a sense it is a summary statement of what God has done and is filled out in the next verses as we see what God the Father has done for them and us in Jesus.

Look with me if you would at the emphasis on what Jesus has done and does.

a. Jesus is our peace, v14 "he himself is our peace". It is through Jesus that the barrier between Jew and gentile has been removed. A few weeks ago in Berlin they celebrated 25 years since the Berlin wall came down. The wall was part of the barrier between east and west, a dividing wall which eventually came down creating the opportunity of unity. Paul says here Jesus has destroyed the "wall of hostility" between Jew and gentile. How did he do that, "by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations". The law was so important to the Jew. It marked them out as God's people and their hope was that through obedience to the law they would be acceptable to God. In his death Jesus has fulfilled the law's demands in that he has died a sacrifice for sin so that all who trust in his death might be forgiven and accepted to God. Jesus' death means a level playing

field for we have all sinned and we can all be forgiven, but only through him. It is the cross not the law which defines the people of God. He has made us all one because wherever we come from, whatever background there is only one way in which we can come to God.

What Paul describes here is like two rivers merging to create one new river, or two motorways merging into one. Jesus has drawn these two groups together he “has made the two one” (v14).

b. Jesus is our creator v15b, “his purpose was in himself to create one new man out of the two”. The point Paul is making here is that in Jesus we become one but we become a new one. He was not thinking of a Gentile Christian or a Jewish Christian just a Christian because as he wrote elsewhere, “There is neither Jew nor Greek (Gentile), slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28). Jesus has created a new people, his people.

I remember back in 1997 I had been on sabbatical, obviously it is something I do often. I had had eight weeks on the island of Gozo just off Malta. On my return I took a bus from Heathrow to Oxford. It was May time and I was amazed, in contrast to the dry brownness of Gozo, how green everything was. It was green. What I saw and recognised was green not blue and yellow together but green. The church Paul is saying is not, in the case of Ephesus, Jew and Gentile together, it is the church, Christians together. Jesus through his cross has created a new humanity in himself. So as we look around our church we don't see male Christians or female Christians, old Christians or new Christians, English Christians or, today on St Andrew's day, Scottish Christians or Nigerian Christians we see Christians for in Christ we have been made one. We are brothers and sisters belonging together despite our backgrounds and differences.

c. Jesus is our reconciler v16, “and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.” It is no good if he just reconciles humanity, for our greatest need is to be reconciled to God and that is what he has done. In less than a month we celebrate Christmas the birth of Jesus, born to be our Saviour – that's what the name Jesus means and that is what humanity needs a Saviour. If you have a Bible there look back to Eph 2:1, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins”. That was their situation. That is the situation of every person, because of our sin, our unwillingness to let God be God we are cut off from God unresponsive or dead to him. Christ was born to die upon a cross to take the punishment you and I deserve for our sin and save us from God's holy and just wrath. By God's grace that is his undeserved love we can be saved, Eph 2:8, “For it is by grace you have been saved”. It is through Jesus some here have been reconciled to God the Father through his death on the cross. It is in Jesus that today the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation is being held out to those who are yet to accept what God has done for us.

d. Jesus is our mediator v18, “for through him we both have access to the Father by the one Spirit”. It is through the death of Jesus that we who are sinful can be made clean and acceptable and so

come to our holy God. He has brought us back to God the Father. Through him and only through him do we have access to God that Father in prayer and praise.

See what God has done in drawing humanity together and then in reconciling humanity to himself.

3. The continuing process v19-22

The word consequently at the start of v19 helps us see where all this is leading. Because of what God has done there has been this great change for these gentile Christians and for us, you were...but now you are.

So what are they through the work of God? They are “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”(v19)

What cards do you carry in your wallet purse or wherever? I carry things like my AA membership card, my Tesco club card, bank card and so on. In the past I have carried things like membership of the social club at Kettering Town. What Paul is saying here is that in Christ these Christians in Ephesus and we who follow on are card carrying members of God’s people. They and we belong. I once belonged to the Sports and Social Club in Eynsham. To become a member I had to be proposed by two existing members. They vouched for me and I was in. Paul is saying that Jesus through his death has “vouched” for us and so we can be members of the people of God the church. We are here by right through what he has done. We belong. That was the message he wanted to get across to these Christians he was writing to and that is the message I want to leave with us today as we finish this series.

In Christ we belong in the people of God. We don’t belong because we help in Lightcatchers or at Coffee and Co. We don’t belong because we are a member of a homegroup or the worship band. We belong because Christ Jesus has united this disparate group of people through his death and also through that death has made us acceptable to our heavenly Father.

If you are “in Christ” then you belong here whether you are here for the first time or the 500th time. Years back when I was a curate we had a building project. We reordered the front of the church and built new rooms. Not long after it was opened the Vicar walked in for a service and was met by a young guy who was welcoming people. The Vicar said “you look as if you own the place” to which the young man said, “no but I have shares in it!”

There are some here who have been part of this church over many years and, through the building project and your giving very literally have shares in it while others have come more recently but “in Christ” we all belong and we all belong equally.

So please if you are the hesitant type, self-effacing, let me assure you from God’s word that if you are “in Christ”, if you are a follower of Jesus then you are fully part of the family of God here in Christ Church and round the world.

However, that is not enough for God. He doesn't just want us to know we belong in his people, he wants to continue to grow that people. This is what we see from v20-22 as he uses the image of God's people as a temple, the place where God lives. He says that work is ongoing. We are being built together, v22. It is a continuing process. God continues to work to build his church together and to grow his church and all the things we have been thinking about over the last weeks in terms of accepting each other forgiving each other and so on help with that building process.

So, like those Christians in Ephesus, as we hear God's word to us today we should:

- a. realise that if we are not followers of Jesus that God the Father wants us to be reconciled to him and has given us his most precious gift in Jesus so that through his death on the cross we may be forgiven our sin and reconciled to our Heavenly Father
- b. remember if we have become followers of Jesus remember what we were before we came to faith, we were cut off from the people of God and from God himself,
- c. recognise what God has done for us through the death of Jesus to draw us together and bring us back to himself,
- d. rejoice in what we are as his people together that no matter what background or how far you are on the path of faith you belong in the people of God and
- e. renew in the light of all this let's renew our efforts to work with God to see his church grow and flourish.