

Ephesians 2:11-22

Have you ever felt that you didn't fit in, you didn't belong? I can recall going with my wife Ruth to visit her relatives in Germany. Having been met off the plane by her uncle we were taken into his flat. The room began to fill up with people who had two things in common, they were German and they were family. Ruth was family and she spoke German. I wasn't really family and I didn't speak German. So I sat there with an inane smile on my face feeling very much out of place. Have you had a similar experience? I've had the same kind of experience at parties and other events, even at a football match where I wasn't supporting either team.

It is of course possible to feel we don't fit in in a church as well. 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. But in many ways we can feel out of place in church. The religious language we use, the way we do things, I'm sure we've been there not knowing whether to sit stand kneel or what, and so on.

In so many ways we can feel we don't fit in.

Paul as he wrote to these Christians in Ephesus was very much aware from the time he'd spent there that some of them felt that they didn't belong. Paul here was writing especially to those Christians in Ephesus who came from a gentile that is a non-Jewish background and he wanted to assure them that they did fit into the Christian church, they did belong and he summarises that in v19 where he said, "you are...fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household". They were citizens, that is part of the kingdom of God, and family, that is members of God's household. They belonged.

However that wasn't always the case.

1. "You were..."

In vs11-12 he reminds them what they were and it is a pretty daunting list, "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world".

The before picture is that these gentile Christians knew nothing of Jesus. Being gentiles they were outside the people of God and the covenant of God and so had no hope and were without God. It is a bleak picture. It is a picture that equates with last week's passage where in 2:1 they were reminded that they had been "dead in your transgressions and sins".

These gentiles were cut off from God and from the people of God

2. "You have been"

However that situation had changed. Paul was writing to them as Christians as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven and members of God's family, so, v13, those who were far away have been brought near. How had that been done? V13 it had been done in Christ Jesus. It was in Christ that these two disparate groups of Jew and gentile had v14 been made one. Christ had destroyed the barrier that separated Jew and Gentile. I am ploughing through Leviticus in my personal Bible study at the moment and it is hard work going through the laws that God established for his people. You look at some and ask why? The answer keeps coming back to show that God's people are a distinctive people a different people a separate people and that means a holy people. However those laws which defined the people of God also defined those who weren't the people of God. The law acted to separate God's people from the rest. It was a barrier and Jesus removed that barrier because in him anyone, Jew or gentile, I can come to the Father through Jesus' death on the cross. In this he has made peace between those who were estranged between Jew and Gentile. So now, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28). The death of Jesus brought peace between Jew and gentile bringing both together under one head who is Jesus.

The death of Jesus also made peace between that united humanity and God. So in v16 through his death he removed the penalty for sin that sinful humans deserved and opened the way into the presence of a holy God. His death brought peace between man and man and between God and man. Those who were cut off from the people of God had been brought in and those who had been cut off from God had been reconciled. They had come a long way.

I have been reading Barbara Demick's book 'Nothing to Envy' over the summer. It is a fascinating book about life in North Korea as told to the author by those who had escaped. Their stories are fascinating about their life there and their escape. You see how far and what a long journey these people had to be reunited with Koreans in the south and praise God the church in South Korea is vibrant so I hope some have been also reconciled to God. Our prayer should be that the wall of hostility in this divided country will come down but more that North Korea which at the moment is so cut off from God would be opened to the gospel of reconciliation.

3. "you are...."

The result of this action of Christ Jesus as we have seen from v19 is that the foreigners got their passports and became naturalised citizens of the Kingdom of God and the aliens were adopted into the family of God.

More than that, together these very different people were being built up into a "holy temple". The gentiles had not been allowed to enter the Jewish Temple but now Paul says there is a new Temple, a new place where God lives by his Holy Spirit and that temple is the individual Christian and the Christians together, whether they came from a Jewish or gentile background. It is a temple founded on the teaching of the apostles such as Paul and the New Testament prophets, which comes to us through the pages of the Bible and with Jesus as the foundation stone who gives shape and definition and stability to this building. But again in this metaphor of building there is a sense of unity, one people united under one head and in one faith as we receive it from the apostles.

4. So what?

What was it that Paul wanted these Christians in Ephesus to take away with them from reading this part of his letter and what would he want us who are reading it over their shoulders to take away?

a. you can belong

Paul was writing to those who had already believed in Jesus and accepted his death on the cross as there means of reconciling them to God. What this says to us is that anyone from any background can belong in the family of God.

b. You do belong

The main thing was that Paul wanted these Christians to be sure they belonged in the family of God the word “consequently” in v19 shows us where he was going. These gentiles may not have had the religious background of some of their Jewish friends but they belonged and on equal terms.

We went to see our grandson last Sunday. He still doesn't do much but he is very much a member of the family and because he is so little gets a lot more attention than I do. By birth he belongs in the family and by new birth in Jesus we belong in the family of God.

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 in. 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. Don't think you don't belong you do whether you have been coming here for thirty years or three weeks, whether you lead worship or sit quietly at the back. Then for those of us who are not hesitant and self effacing and perhaps have been part of the family of God over many years, we need to be sensitive to those around us. Just as we take extra care of our grandson we need as the family of God to make sure we take extra care of those who are new to the church and to the faith to help them know they belong in this part of the family of God. You belong.

c. you have rights

A citizen of any country will have rights and a member of a family will have rights. Those who “in Christ” are citizens of the Kingdom of God and members of God's family have rights. I have already spelt out the first one in that we belong and so as we come into the family whether we are meeting here on Sunday or in our homegroups, prayer partnerships or just over coffee we have a confidence that we belong among these people we are not, as I was in Germany, outsiders. But then Paul spells out a second right in v18 we have access to the Father. As God's children we can come to him in prayer when we wish. We have access, just as the sound of skype makes me aware that my son in Los Angeles has access to his human father. Because we belong in God's family we can come and talk with him whenever we wish. Are you making use of that access? You can do it on your own, in pairs, in homegroup, in the prayer meeting, here in the service, after the service. It is a privilege and right of belonging in the people of God.

d. you have responsibilities.

When I was young we four boys had our list of chores for each day, cleaning out the ash from the fire, laying and lighting the fire, washing up and so on. There was always something to be done. It was part of being family. If we are part of the family of God that brings privileges and rights but also responsibilities. I can only just list a few for us, of meeting together. How can we grow together and be built together as God's temple if we don't meet together? Of caring for each other, have a look round and ask who is not here and who is going to see if they are OK? Of praying for each other, encouraging each other, serving each other be it coffee after the service, or in the children's work or youth work, or countless other ways.

So as one of the questions on the service sheet asks – what are your responsibilities? In any family we have responsibilities and the family of God is no different!

Being family brings responsibilities but not in the terms of chores but in terms of love and desire to serve each other – that is the heart of Jesus! Paul's words to these Christians from a gentile background was that they did belong amongst God's people. It may not have been true in the past but through Jesus it was now. That meant they had privileges and responsibilities. The message that comes to us down the centuries is the same. If you are a follower of Jesus then you belong and as such you have both rights to enjoy and responsibilities to fulfil in service of God and his people.