

The Universal Church

Ephesians 2:11-22

Gordon Randall – Sunday, 28th April 2013

Introduction

Our reading this morning is from Ephesians – a letter of encouragement sent to the church in Ephesus made up of Gentiles and Jews who had converted to Christ – in it Paul describes the nature and appearance of the church, and challenges believers to function as the living body of Christ on earth. Our actual passage begins with a picture of being alienated – both from God and his family. But, the good news is the second part speaks of reconciliation and God's love for us and what he has done for us in Jesus.

But first a bit of context. The Bible in Genesis opens with a clear declaration of the unity of mankind. But after the fall we discover the beginning of human division and separation. Even God himself seems to contribute to this division by then choosing Israel out of all the nations to be his 'holy' people. But remember in calling Abraham he promised to bless all the earth's families and in choosing Israel he intended her to become a light to all the nations. Sadly Israel twisted her intended role and privileged position and ended up despising the Gentiles often describing them as 'dogs'. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was huge. Verse 14 from our reading speaks of a 'dividing wall of hostility'. Perhaps symbolic - but Paul is also referring to a real wall – the middle wall of partition in the Jerusalem temple. On this wall was a notice (which archaeologists unearthed): 'Any Gentile passing this wall will have only himself to blame for his ensuing death'. It was a real dividing wall – but it reflected an even deeper dividing wall of hostility.

So this is the background. All human beings (Jews and Gentiles) are alienated from God because of sin, and the Gentiles were also alienated from the people of God. But then in our reading from Ephesians 2 we see how Jesus destroyed both these two forms of alienation: Verse 14 he... has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. Verse 16...His purpose was ... to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

This passage shows how Jesus created a new society where alienation gives way to reconciliation, and hostility to peace. This is a foretaste of a final unity under Jesus' headship in the coming together of a new heaven and a new earth at the end of time. So that's some context. Let's now look at our reading. To help I've broken this down into three sections.

1. V11-12 – What we once were
2. V 13-18 – What Jesus has done
3. V 19-22 – What we have now become

1. What we once were?

At the beginning of Chapter 2 Paul reminds his readers (Jews and Gentiles) that before Jesus Christ they were lost in sin, unable to save themselves and facing certain death. At the start of our reading (v11) Paul refers particularly to the Gentile world before Jesus reminding them how the Jews mocked them - calling them the 'un-circumcision'. Circumcision was an outward sign of membership of God's covenant people but was merely a physical sign and had become overstated. Circumcision was done by human hands. What was more important was a circumcision of the heart, spiritual not physical – through Christ **this is** what was needed by, and available to, both Jews and Gentiles alike.

In verse 12 Paul points out how the Gentile had previously been....“Separate from Christ” – with no expectation of a coming Messiah. The Gentiles' had been “excluded from citizenship in Israel” and “foreigners to the covenants of the promise” (in other words the promise made by God to Abraham) they had been: “without hope and without God in the world”. Yes - God planned and promised to include them one day, but they didn't know this and consequently had no hope to sustain them.

They were 'without God' because, although God had revealed himself in nature the Gentiles had ignored this truth and turned instead to idolatry. They had been 'hopeless' and 'godless' - far away, separated from God and his people.

Have you ever been in a similar situation? Before I became a Christian at the age of 36 (and although I didn't realise it at the time) I was in exactly that same situation – hopeless and godless. Alienated from God and from his people. I'd rebelled against the authority of God and knew little or nothing of true human community. What Paul describes here is still representative of today's world without Christ? People still build walls of partition and division. Barriers of race, tribe and class. Divisiveness is a constant characteristic of every community without Christ. We all experience it. Paul says remember and never forget. This is what we were before God's love reached down and found us. By remembering our former alienation we are better able to remember the greatness of the grace which forgave and is transforming us. Just like the Gentiles – that's the way we were before Jesus.

2. What Jesus Christ has done for us (v 13-18)

Note v13 begins "But now...". Paul is stressing the Gentile experience. 'Remember that you were separate from Christ....but now in Christ Jesus you...have been brought near....' This is the difference Christ has made - a 'nearness to God'. God does not keep his distance or stand on his dignity, he doesn't insist on any complicated ritual or set of rules. Instead through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit we have immediate 'access' to him as our Father as verse 18 confirms "through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit". It's fantastic, a huge privilege! Now read (v14) For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

Through his sacrifice Jesus offers himself to his people (both then and today) to be united with them - he is the peacemaker between us and with God. Jesus died on the cross to get rid of the divisive hostility between Jew and Gentile, between man and God. How... "by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations." Initially this seems to contradict Jesus' sermon on the mount where he specifically declared the opposite, that he had **not** come to abolish the law but to fulfil it? However, the context of the sermon on the mount shows Jesus was actually referring to the moral law. Paul's primary reference here is the ceremonial law (rules and regulations) – for example 'circumcision' (the main physical difference between Jews and Gentiles v.11), the material sacrifices, the dietary regulations and the rules about ritual 'cleanness' and 'uncleanness' which governed social relationships. They erected a serious barrier between Jews and Gentiles, but Jesus sets all this ceremonial stuff aside. Also Jesus didn't abolish the moral law as a standard of behaviour but he did abolish it as a way of salvation. In other words we are not saved by trying to be good. Whenever the law is viewed in this way it's divisive. For we cannot obey it, however hard we try. Therefore it separates us from God and from each other. But Jesus perfectly obeyed the law in his life, and in his death bore the consequences of our disobedience. He took upon himself 'the curse of the law' in order to free us from it.

Acceptance with God is now through faith in Christ crucified alone, whether for Jews or for Gentiles. Faith unites us, we all come to God through Christ in the same way and are brought to the same level at the foot of Christ's cross. Jesus abolished both the regulations of the ceremonial law and the condemnation of the moral law. Both were divisive. Both were put aside by the cross. So although Jews and Gentiles were alienated and hostile with one another - once the divisive law had been set aside, there was nothing to keep these two sides apart. Instead Jesus, "created in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace". This new man is the Universal Church community viewed corporately. A new humanity, united by Jesus *in himself*. Created when Jesus abolished the divisive law on the cross, but actually coming into existence and growing only by personal union with him. Inequality before God is abolished. There is a new unity in Christ. Christ revealed the total sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles, and then offered his salvation to both. Only Christ breaks down the walls of prejudice, reconciles all believers to God, and unifies us in one body. Jews and Gentiles can now be at peace with one another and free to come to God through Christ.

3. What we have now become (v 19-22)

Paul now sums up as verse 19 begins... *Consequently*, what is the result of Christ's achievement and announcement of peace? It is this: *you* (Gentiles) *are no longer* what you used to be, *foreigners and aliens*. Your status has dramatically changed. Now you 'belong' in a way you never did before. You used to be refugees; now you have a home.

Instead of being 'excluded from citizenship in Israel' you are now "*fellow-citizens with God's people*" - where God himself is ruling his people, and giving them all the privileges and responsibilities which his rule implies. Gentiles and Jews now belong on equal terms - free and secure - part of God's new society. Verse 19 also says: *you are...members of God's household*. In Jesus Jews and Gentiles find themselves more than fellow citizens under his rule; they are together children in his family. Jesus' new people are a new humanity, international and worldwide. What then could be their temple and focus of unity? In verse 20-22 Paul describes the vision of this new temple.

First the foundation. Nothing is more important to any building than a solid, stable foundation. Paul says of Jesus' new community it is *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets* (v20). The apostles – Jesus' chosen disciples, plus Paul and James and one or two others were called and authorised to teach in his name, and were eyewitnesses of his resurrection. What they taught and commanded they expected the church to believe, preserve and obey. The word 'prophets' also indicates inspired teachers to whom the word of God came and who conveyed that word to others faithfully.

The cornerstone is crucial. It is itself part of and essential to the foundation; holding the building steady, and keeping it in line. *Christ Jesus (is) the chief cornerstone.*²¹ *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.*" Jesus the cornerstone is indispensable to the church's unity and growth. Unless it is constantly and securely related to Jesus, the church's unity disintegrates and its growth stops.

In verse 22 Paul then moves on from the whole structure of the temple to its individual stones. The extra stones being built into the structure are '*you too*', by which he means his Gentile readers. The Jerusalem temple was an exclusively Jewish building - Gentiles were forbidden to enter. But now Gentiles are not only admitted; they are themselves constituent parts of the temple of God. What is the purpose of the new temple? In principle, it is the same as the purpose of the old, namely to be a *dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit* (v.22). The new temple is a spiritual building (God's household) and an international community and it has a worldwide spread (wherever God's people are to be found). This is where God dwells. He is not tied to holy buildings but to holy people, to his own new society. He lives in them, individually and as a community. It is his new society, his redeemed people scattered throughout the inhabited world. They are his home on earth. They will also be his home in heaven.

So this is the vision of Jesus' universal church. How do we measure up? Last Sunday at our annual meeting Ian offered a review of the previous 12 months. It was hugely encouraging. For example...(and this is not an exhaustive list) ...supporting our mission partners, celebrating Baptisms, men coming together for meals, joyfully embracing our worship (remember the Olympics), helping children and young people to develop in their faith, the hands up for Jesus puppets. Reaching out through things like luncheon club, the village show, running a shop in the shopping centre, carol singing, dialogue suppers, quiz nights, African drum workshops, Mothering Sunday, the shoe boxes.

As well as coming together for prayer, to learn and study together, to be in fellowship with one another, to have home-groups, to celebrate together (Amy and Rob's wedding), and also to mourn together (when loved ones die). To support one another through illness, redundancy, depression and hard times, to visit those in need, to be a family under God and growing as disciples of Jesus Christ. Let's not beat ourselves up – these are examples of God's new society, of Jesus' universal church right here in Chineham.

Conclusion

But we must guard against complacency remembering we are work in progress and like all other churches we're not there yet. Across the Universal Church we still find alienation, separation and lack of unity and this is offensive to Christ and actually also offensive although in a different way, to the world. It hinders the world from believing in Jesus. God intends his people to be a visual model of the gospel, to demonstrate before people's eyes the good news of reconciliation.

Yes – we're not perfect but we need to feel the offence to Christ and the world when we get things wrong, to recognise when there is a credibility gap between the church's talk and the church's walk, to repent of our readiness to excuse and even condone our failures, and to determine to do something about it.

So how can we do this? Well as an example at our annual meeting Ian also talked about the need for us to continue to 'work out'. In other words to remain spiritually fit through regular prayer, bible study, worship, fellowship and service. To continue to 'shine out' – being a light to others sharing our faith in word and deed. And to continue to 'hold out' remembering what Jesus has done for us and being the people God always intended us to be "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:13).

Is there anything more urgent today, for the honour of Christ and for the spread of the gospel, than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is... a single new humanity, a model human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as Peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due to his name.

But for now as Christians today - God's universal church is not yet complete. It *rises to **become** a holy temple in the Lord*. We are work in progress - only after the creation of the new heaven and the new earth will the voice from the throne declare with emphatic finality: "Now the dwelling of God is with men. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God". (Rev 21:3).