

9AM – 16 MAY 2021

RECONCILED [EPHESIANS 2:11-12]

Introduction – ‘Welcome’ to the Temple

I’ve mentioned this before but I am fascinated by Bible Archaeology. I love the thought of being able to touch things that were physically present when the events of the Bible took place. It’s a tangible reminder that the hope we have in Jesus is not myth – he was a real person who really lived, died and rose again in Palestine 2000 years ago.

Over the years there have been lots of remarkable archaeological finds in and around Israel, but one of the most prominent was discovered at the gates to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in 1871. I’ll get Sue to bring it up on screen.

This metre long limestone slab actually dates back to the time of Jesus and was a sign within the Temple Mount. The ancient historian Josephus had written about these signs, but until 1871 we’d never discovered them. These signs hung on a wall which separated the Court of the Gentiles from the rest of the Temple Precinct. The Court of the Gentiles was a concourse that wrapped around the Temple and in which livestock selling and money changing happened. It was here that Jesus drove out the buyers and sellers in Matthew 21, and it’s highly likely that this sign stood there in the concourse on that very occasion.

So what did this sign say to those who were arriving at the Temple? Well the inscription, which would have once been highlighted with red letters, reads,

“No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the Temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”¹

How about that for a welcome sign to church! It reveals the hostility between, and alienation of Gentile from Jew, that existed in Jesus’ day (and is still sadly playing itself out in Gaza today). Paul himself experienced this in Acts 21 when he was almost killed owing to the false accusation that he had brought a Gentile into the Temple precinct.

1. The Old Hostility (2:11-12)

It is this old hostility to which Paul refers in verse 11, **Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands) –**

Paul brings to the Ephesian’s remembrance the hostility that used to exist between them as Gentiles and the God’s people, Israel. The hostility between Jew and Gentile manifested itself in derogatory name-calling. Jews labelled the Gentiles literally as ‘foreskin’, whilst Gentiles returned the favour and called them the ‘circumcision.’ Circumcision of course was the sign of God’s covenant with Israel, the symbol that He had set them apart to be his people. There was clear demarcation between those who claimed to be God’s people and those who weren’t. And those who weren’t had no business associating with God’s people, let alone entering his Temple.

Yet as much as this distinction had devolved into hostility, the alienation of Gentiles (non-Jews) from God’s people was a real problem. We read on in verse 12, **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.**

¹ J. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: Matthew*, 92.

All the covenant promises bestowed upon the people of Israel find their culmination in Christ. It is only through Christ we are saved and it is only through the fulfilment of the covenant promises given to Israel that Christ came to rescue us. It is why Jesus says to the Samaritan woman in John 4:22, **You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.** Thus to be cut off from Israel was to be cut off from the God of the universe. To be cut off from God's covenant promises, was to be excluded from their fulfilment in Christ.

The Ephesians therefore were without God and without hope in the world. And as we discovered last week, that is the plight of the entire world outside of Christ – there is no hope without Christ.

2. The New Humanity (2:13-18)

Yet you'll notice a similar trajectory in this week's passage to last week's. Paul firstly reminds the Ephesian church of who they were before Christ, before reminding them of who they are now owing to God's intervention.

We thus read from verse 13 (I'm going to read from the ESV which tracks more literally with the Greek and makes the logical connections in the passage more clear), **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.**

Christ came to bring peace to the hostility. Through his blood he has brought us Gentiles near by abolishing the law and the commandments. Yet how has this brought peace? Why did Jesus abolish the Old Testament law and its commandments? We see the two answers here.

Firstly in verse 15, **that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.** Matthew 5:17 reveals that Jesus abolished the law by fulfilling it. The law of the Old Testament anticipated and pointed towards the coming Messiah. Jesus fulfilled this anticipation in his coming. Just as outdoor fairy lights become redundant when engulfed in the light of the rising morning sun, so too did all the ceremonial laws which demarcated Jew from Gentile, become redundant. No longer was being part of the people of God contingent upon being *in* the nation state of Israel and adhering to all its civic and ceremonial laws. Rather, because of Christ, God's people are now constituted on the basis of whether or not they are *in* Christ. The dividing wall in the Temple precinct becomes redundant, indeed the Temple itself becomes obsolete, because upon the death of Jesus, the curtain was torn in the holy of holies, and we now have access to God together...

Yet the *second* reason given for Jesus abolition of the law is stated in verse 16, [that he] **might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.** Whilst on long service leave I learned the powerful story a young woman who survived a plane crash back in 2006.

Kimberly was a young 21 year old Australian on holidays in the States and had signed up to go sky-diving whilst there. Yet early into her flight the plane suffered engine failure and it soon became apparent that the plane was going to crash. At this point Kimberly's skydiving instructor took Kimberly into his arms, calmly talked her through all that was happening and about to happen, and cradled her head into his neck to keep her neck secure. Before impact he then positioned himself to take the full force of the crash. The instructor died, Kimberly was one of only two survivors.

God's law and its commandments proscribe death for sinners like you and I. In his body on the cross, Jesus absorbed the full impact of God's wrath so that those who are nestled into him by faith might

walk free. In his body Jesus abolished the law in the sense that he fulfilled its moral requirements and removed its moral condemnation.

Jesus has killed the hostility between Jew and Gentile and between humanity and God. He has done so by abolishing the ceremonial requirements of the law which divided Jew from Gentile and by abolishing the moral consequences of the law which placed us under God's wrath. As a result, those who have been joined to Christ and reconciled to God by faith form a new humanity, a new people of God. There is no more dividing wall of hostility between us. The gospel of Christ is a gospel of peace. Peace between us and God and peace between us and each other.

Yet by way of application on this point, how tragic it is then we re-erect walls of hostility in the church. Our society is becoming alarmingly divided at the moment. We erect dividing walls of hostility along race, gender, privilege, victimhood, faith, sexuality, political leanings and so on. The result is that all of us live our lives walking on egg shells for fear of provoking the beast of outrage that seems to be lurking just beneath the surface of our public discourse.

Let us not follow society's lead in this regard. Let us not erect these walls in the church when Christ has already killed the hostility. Public discourse might tempt you to look at me as white, privileged, middle-class male (and yes these are realities that I need to be self-aware of when loving my neighbour), but Christ will not let you do so - first and foremost, I am your brother in Christ. Geo-political tensions might give rise to racism in the community, but *never* do so here in the church, because before we have allegiance to any nation state or ethnicity, our collective and primary identity is as the people of God. As Colossians 3:11 says, **Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.**

The only true and lasting human peace comes in Christ. Christ is the only hope for humanity to find true and lasting peace with each other and God. What a shining light we will be for the gospel when men and women, parents and children, bosses and employees, European, indigenous, Asian, African come together in love. Indeed, one of the overriding themes in Ephesians is about us coming together in unity given the unity we have in Christ.

3. Our Present Access (2:18-22)

So the old hostility of verses 11-12 has been replaced by a new humanity in Christ (13-18). Verses 18-22 spell out four implications for us as we close –

3.1 You Have Access (2:18)

Verse 18 reads, **For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.** God has granted you access all areas. He bids you into his throne room. He desires to hear from you in prayer and will certainly answer you as you pray. What an invitation and what a privilege that we can draw near to God individually, but also together. That is fundamentally what we are doing on a Sunday – drawing near to God together.

3.2 You Belong (2:19)

Secondly verse 19 reads, **Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.** Not only do you not have to be sheepish around God, you don't have to be sheepish around His people. You *are* citizens of God's people, you *are* members of his family. Hear that glorious truth this morning. In Christ you are not a pretender, you are not an outsider, you belong with God's people and no matter how new you are to us, no matter how different you feel, if you are in Christ, you belong. You're part of the family. What a joy.

3.3 The Word of God Is Our Foundation (2:20)

Verse 20 continues and shifts from the metaphor of family to that of a building, [we are] **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.**

The reference to Apostles here is none other than the New Testament Apostles and their Holy Spirit inspired witness that we have recorded in scripture. The counterparts to this witness are the Prophets of the Old Testament who anticipated the coming of Christ. Both announce the gospel and point backwards and forwards respectively to the chief cornerstone of the church. In other words, the church is built on none other than the Word of God which testifies to Christ, the Word made flesh. Where there is no gospel, there is no church. In order for people to come into God's household, they must first hear the gospel and build their lives upon it by faith.

Similarly, our ongoing life together in Christ needs to be built upon the Word of God. We move on from the foundations of God's Word at our own peril. It's why the ministry of the Word is of prime importance on a Sunday and why we always show how a passage points forwards or backwards to Christ. It's why our Bible study groups are called Bible study groups. We don't primarily meet mid-week to share stories, have a laugh and enjoy a meal (though please don't stop doing those things!), we do so to build our lives on God's Word. You can find friendship, connection and community all over the place, but distinctly Christian community, the community of God's people is built upon the word. When you find friendships here at church, excellent, but don't sell them short, let them go deeper and stronger and eternal as you let the Word of God form the foundation of your friendship, or even your family relationships. Don't let God be peripheral in your relationships here or at home, rather let him be the rich and stable foundation.

3.4 We are the Fullness of Christ (2:21-22)

Listen to verses 21-22, **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.**

Where was it that people could draw near to God in the Old Testament? Where was it that God specially manifested his presence? The Temple. Yet here in Christ, we now are the Temple, we are the place he dwells. Consider again what we heard at the end of chapter 1 (:22-23), **And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.**

Not only does Ephesians describe us as the Temple in which God presences himself, but as Christ's body by which Christ's fullness is brought and expressed to the world. We have been sealed by the Spirit of Christ and we now bring Christ to the world. Whilst we one could notionally go to Turkey and touch the Temple Warning Inscription that was unearthed 150 years ago, our friends, family and neighbours cannot go and touch Christ. They cannot look into the gaze of his eyes, they cannot hear the resonance of his voice as he preaches, they cannot feel the touch of his hands as he heals. But they can see you, they can hear you, they can touch you.

You are the body of Christ. You are the Temple of Christ. You are the one through whom God makes his presence known. The church is the bride whom God has wrapped around the world in love to reveal himself to it. You are the one that God has appointed, along with all God's people to bring Christ to the world. You are the hands and feet of Christ, so to speak. So shine

What an awesome reality and privilege, let us pray with thanksgiving as we close.