

Ephesians 2: 11-22 True Unity Through Jesus

One of the things we believe in as evangelical Christians is what's termed the perspicuity of the Scriptures. That means, that it is possible for anyone who can read to understand the main message of Bible. That doesn't mean we don't need to use our brains but it does mean that when we look at the text the Bible's meaning is plain for everyone to see.

Now when you pick up a Bible passage halfway through a book, as we doing today, the first thing we need to do is to look to see how this passage links with the passages that came before it. And you notice what the first word is? It's *'therefore'*. That means the point Paul is going to make in these verses is based on what he has just said. Because of what I've just said.... So let's remind ourselves what he has just said.

In the opening verses of chapter 1 Paul listed the glorious blessings that are ours in Christ. When we become a Christian, when we are saved, when we are "in Christ" we get a new name, a new family, a new hope, a new status, a new spirit, yes, a new challenge, but a new future. Those are our blessings in Christ and they are so huge that, at the end of chapter 1, he prays that the Ephesians might fully understand and know deep down in their hearts what is already theirs. They are rich beyond comparison and Paul wants them to know it so that their lives might reflect that glorious truth.

But as we saw last week, the danger in receiving a huge gift is that we can think we deserved it. And since Paul wants the Ephesians to be rejoicing in Christ and not in their own goodness, he takes them back to what they were like outside of Christ: dead, slaves to sin worldly, influenced by evil, deserving of wrath, with no good in them. it was a bleak description. And it describes us outside of Christ too. But then came verse 4 and one of the great "buts" in the Bible. *"But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ Jesus even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved."* In Christ the dead are brought to life, the sinful are made clean, those under the influence of evil are released and raised up and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. And those who were once living for themselves now have good works to do in response to God's goodness to them.

That's what's gone before. But the gospel of Jesus doesn't just affect our own spiritual standing with God. Jesus' death hasn't simply made a way to redeem individuals, he has redeemed a people for himself. So Paul's point in verses 11 to 22 is that through faith in Jesus we are now not only reconciled to Christ, but reconciled to all other believers, irrespective of our backgrounds.

Now that may not sound such a big deal to you and me. After all, our society is very mixed and our church is very mixed. At my last count we have 12 different nationalities represented in our church family. But in the context Paul was writing to this unity amongst believers was world changing news.

Up until the death and resurrection of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles had nothing to do with each other. Let me read you what one commentator writes about their deep-seated hostility. *"The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentiles. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loved only Israel of all the nations he has made... It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or vice versa, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death."*

And we see the level of disunity clearly in this passage don't we. Verses 11 to 13 especially show how divided these communities were. There is the name-calling in verse 11. The Gentiles were excluded from citizenship in Israel in verse 12. They were foreigners to the covenants of promise and without any hope and without God in the world. Verse 14 talks about a dividing wall of hostility between the 2 communities. They are at war with one another, with the Gentiles being treated as foreigners and strangers, verse 19. This is strong language. The Jews hated the Gentiles and vice versa.

And that was a big problem for Gentiles because throughout the Old Testament the only way you could know God was to come to the Jewish people. They had God's written word. They had God's Law. They had the temple where God dwelt. But the Gentiles were excluded, held back. Some of that was physical. If a Gentile wanted to worship the God of Israel, then they could come but only so far. There was a literal wall in the temple compound barring them from getting past the far outer courts.

But there were also huge social barriers. The Jews were called to be a light to the world to point people to God, but they had taken their calling to be God's people as a means of pride and had socially shut the Gentiles out. And that meant the Gentiles couldn't hear the good news of God and didn't know the right way to live and so had no hope in the world because they were living without God. What a desperate situation in which to be.

But in Jesus, all that changes. That's what verses 14 to 18 explain to us. Jesus came as a wrecking ball to break down the walls that divide. He came the peacemaker to bring warring factions together.

How does Jesus do that? Well verses 14 and 15 tell us that he destroyed the dividing wall of hostility "*by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.*" Both the moral law and the sacrificial law are in view here, as are the division between us and God, and us and each other. So there's a lot going on! But let's try and take it one step at a time.

As we saw last week, our sin separates us from God, but on the cross Jesus died in our place so that all who truly repent and believe in him may not perish but, by God's grace alone, have full forgiveness and eternal life.

For that to be possible, 2 things had to happen. Both the Old and New Testaments say that there can be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood, so a sacrifice had to be made. But that sacrifice had to be appropriate. The blood of bulls and sheep sacrificed in the temple never fully took away sin. They were a sign of faith in the God who alone can forgive on behalf of the one bringing the sacrifice, but they also pointed to the one perfect sacrifice that Jesus would make on the cross. So, like the sheep used in the temple sacrifices, the sacrifice for sin had to be without any blemish. But to make full atonement, to pay the price for the sins of human beings, the sacrifice had to be one of us.

And so the Son of God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, and lived a perfect, sinless life so that when he died on the cross he fulfilled the demands of the moral law – because he had kept it all – and he fulfilled the demands of the sacrificial law, because his sacrifice, made once for all upon the cross, made any other sacrifice unnecessary. That's why he could cry out on the cross "it is finished" because everything necessary had been accomplished.

And since, in Jesus, all the demands of the sacrificial laws were fulfilled, so through faith in him we are able to stand clean and pure before a holy God, wrapped in the righteous robes of Jesus. So all the Jewish purity laws, laws about ceremonial washing, laws about what food you could and couldn't eat, laws about who you could and couldn't mix with or eat with, they all went out the window as well. If in Christ we are made pure in God's sight and are righteous before him, and if that has been all done by Jesus' work on the cross, then none of these other laws that separated Jew and Gentile had any purpose any more. Even circumcision, the sign that you were a member of God's people, was now superfluous. The sign of belonging to God's family was no longer something done to men by men, it was a work of Holy Spirit in our hearts by faith.

So do you see how those two walls have come tumbling down? There is now no longer anything that can separate us from God because Jesus has demolished those walls. And there is now no longer anything to separate Jew from Gentile because salvation for both Jew and Gentile is through faith in Jesus. That's the message of Jesus, the message of peace with God and peace between people that Jesus preached in the days following his resurrection, and the message of peace that he preached by his Spirit, through the

apostles and prophets of the New Testament and that's the message of peace he still preaches through pastors and teachers today and through us as we go out with the good news of the gospel. Jesus is the divine wrecking ball that breaks down walls of hostility and separation. He is the divine peacemaker between previously warring factions. And he accomplished those things as he died on the cross in our place.

Can you see how that is such good news? Our world is divided into rich and poor, men and women, black-and-white, gay and straight, old and young, techno-and technophobic, but in Jesus all of those dividing walls are destroyed. Background and culture and education and wealth and experience are utterly irrelevant to our salvation because the same gospel, through repentance and faith in Jesus, is the same gospel that preached to people of every nation and background. And when people from those different backgrounds and histories come to know Jesus then the barriers and the walls and the division and hostility which is often there between people also come crumbling down. Why? Because in Christ we are united.

In verses 19 to 22, Paul explains just how united we are. And it is astonishing! He's writing here to Gentiles who were hated and despised, cut off from God in the temple and this is what he says. You used to be foreigners and strangers but now you are not only fellow citizens with God's people (that's Jews who believe in Jesus) but you are also members of God's household. The Gentiles who were excluded from the temple courts are now welcomed into the holy of holiness through faith in Christ. They get call God their father. They get to call Jesus their brother. And so they are now a brother or sister to all those who are also brothers of Christ and sons and daughters of God.

So look around you this morning. Notice the people from different backgrounds, from different countries, who speak different languages, with different traditions. Despite those differences, all of us, who are Christians are part of the same family. And the things that might otherwise divide us are now utterly irrelevant. So look round at your family. Isn't that amazing. Only in the church can you see such things. Only in Jesus do barriers really come tumbling down. That's a message our divided world needs to hear isn't it. We long to belong, but in the modern age we are more divided than ever. But in Jesus, we can find true unity and true friendship and true belonging.

But Paul makes it clear in the same verses that true unity is not just about being on a membership role of an organisation; true unity is built, verse 20, "*on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone.*" True unity comes from a shared faith in Christ, a shared understanding of the Scriptures, a shared hope and a shared purpose.

Over the last week some 2000 Anglicans from around the world, archbishops, bishops, clergy, lay people met in Jerusalem for the 3rd GAFCON gathering. They were from different nations, they spoke different languages, sang different songs and had very different cultural backgrounds, but they were united in what they believed about the Bible about salvation, about Jesus, and about how we should live in God's world. And it is our shared faith that unites us to them and to all faithful Christians around the world wherever they are from, whatever they look like, whatever language they use, however they worship. It is the gospel that unites us and unity is a beautiful sight! We can sometimes feel alone, weak, irrelevant to the world but friends as Anglicans we are part of a worldwide church, united in Jesus, and as Christians first of all our family is wider still than that!

I'd love to say that as a deanery of Anglicans in Stevenage and across the Diocese of St Albans and across the Church of England that we are united in this gospel and in the faith once and for all delivered to the saints by the apostles but I can't. Sadly in our day many who claim the name of Jesus, even some who are bishops and clergy ministers in the Church of England, have left the faith behind and are now teaching and believing a different gospel with a different Jesus. If you read my comments about the recent Deanery Synod a couple of weeks ago you'll know how some of those divisions have shown themselves. It was a

painful evening and not just because some who opposed us got really angry, but because it demonstrated clearly that we have no real unity with some other Anglican churches in our town. It's a desperately sad situation so please pray for me and the PCC as we chat through these issues and try and figure out how we respond with both grace and truth to these difficult days. But's what's clear to me is that we cannot continue to walk alongside those with whom we disagree on fundamental gospel issues. There is no such thing as unity through "good disagreement" because our only unity comes from Christ.

And friends that unity, that true unity in Jesus, is not only glorious but purposeful! Because as we are joined to Christ and are joined to one another, so we become a holy temple in the Lord. We are used to thinking about God dwelling in us, as individuals, by his Spirit, but here Paul is talking about God dwelling in us as a body of believers. And as we grow closer the Christ so we grow closer to one another. The greater unity with Jesus, the more we know and love and serve him, so the more we will know and love and serve and be served by each other. It's like the spokes of a wheel. The closer the individual spokes get to the hub, the closer they get to one another and the stronger the bond between them. So also the closer we get to Christ, the closer we get to one another and the stronger the bond we have between one another. And as we do that, so the glory of God becomes more visible in our midst.

In 1 Kings chapter 10, Solomon dedicates the temple in Jerusalem and the glory of the Lord fills it in a dramatic and glorious way. The way God's Spirit fills the Church as believers are united in Christ is far less dramatic, but it is no less important. True love and unity between Christians is a key sign of the gospel and a sign of his presence amongst us. Jesus himself said that non-believers would know we belong to him by our love for one another. I wonder if visitors to us would see that? I wonder if that's been your experience. I hope so. Whilst we will have some friends in the church that are closer than others, there should never be anyone standing on their own over coffee for very long; never anyone in need of a listening ear with no one to talk to, no one isolated and ignored – not if we are truly family, united in Jesus.

So as I close, let me leave you with two challenges that flow out of this passage. And the 1st is to ask whether or not you have been reconciled to God? You can't expect unity with Christians, not real lasting unity, unless the dividing wall of hostility between you as a sinner and a holy God is dealt with. But because of Jesus' death on the cross, you no longer need to be separate from God so let me appeal to you be reconciled to him today. Come in repentance and faith and be welcomed into God's eternal family.

But since most of you here today have already been reconciled to God through faith in Christ, let me ask you this question: are you reconciled with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Have you fallen out with someone and never really forgiven them? Has someone said a harsh word and hurt you so you no longer speak to them? If so you need to repent before God and you may need to ask them for their forgiveness.

Or what about this: are there people in church you avoid because they've got a different background, or have a different colour skin or different interests? Whatever division there is between you, as we say the peace and sing the song that leads us into communion, why not take that moment to go and speak to them and hold out your hand of friendship. Perhaps you could even chat to them over coffee or invite them round to your house for a meal or a cup of tea. All relationships need time and effort, so will you put that effort in so you can grow in unity with those with whom you are united in Christ.

Friends when the people of God stand united in faith, declaring the unchanging gospel of Jesus with one voice, loving one another with generosity and love the world notices and wants what we have! The cross of Jesus brings peace with God and in Christ, a true peace with each other, and that is good news for the nations. Let us stand firm in that faith and pray that as we grow closer to Christ that by his Spirit he will draw us closer to each other, so that together we might be messengers of his gospel of peace that has brought us, unworthy though we are, into his family. For God's glory. Amen.