

Us and them

Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 19th July 2009 (7th Sunday after Pentecost)

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

Herod's Temple in Jerusalem was the ultimate 'tourist attraction' in 1st century Palestine. His Temple complex occupied an area equivalent to about 30 football pitches on top of a giant rock, and was constructed in rising tiers. The central part, the Holy of Holies, was an impressive box-shaped structure that rose to 150ft – matching the towers at Bristol, Exeter, Peterborough and Winchester Cathedrals. It was built of cream stone blocks, and the perimeter at the top was picked out by pure gold spikes.

Picture yourself, camera and guidebook in hand, approaching Jerusalem. Even when you're still some distance away, you can already see the whole structure, with the cream and gold Holy of Holies glistening in the Palestinian sun, and smoke from burnt offerings rising into the clear blue sky. And long before you get to the entrance, you'll already hear the hubbub of all the goings on in the giant Temple complex.

Once you pass through the entrance, you find yourself in a spacious outer court running all the way round the Temple. This is where money changers and other merchants set up their stalls. From this outer court, you can view the rising tiers of the rest of the Temple, leading up to the gleaming Holy of Holies itself. But between all of that and where you are standing, there is a 5 ft high stone barricade displaying prominent notices written in Latin and Greek:

'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.'

Your tour has come to an abrupt and premature end – because you are a Gentile.

Paul almost certainly had this stone barricade in mind when he wrote the words in the second half of Ephesians 2, where he talked about how the difference Jesus had made to the status of Gentiles. Before the death and resurrection of Christ, we Gentiles were

'without [a Messiah] ('Christ'), ... aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise.' (2:12)

But, says Paul, the work of Christ on the cross changed all that:

'But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.' (2:13-14).

There is our stone barricade: 'the dividing wall'. The Greek text can be punctuated in different ways. I like the RSV rendering:

‘For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.’ (2:14, RSV)

‘The dividing wall of hostility’ – a metaphor to us, but a very physical reality to Paul. He wrote to the Ephesians while under house arrest in Rome. The ‘dividing wall of hostility’ in the Temple played a direct role in putting Paul in this situation. The story is recorded in Acts 21. A small group of Jewish trouble makers persuaded the crowds in Jerusalem that Paul had brought a Gentile, indeed an Ephesian, through the ‘dividing wall’ into the exclusively Jewish parts of the Temple. These trouble makers

‘... stirred up the whole crowd. They seized him, shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who ... has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple ... While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. ...’ (Acts 21:27ff)

The tribune rushed to quell the riot and rescued Paul. He had to find out what caused the disturbance – the Romans were perennially nervous about the fringes of their empire. But the tribune failed to establish the truth to his own satisfaction. Paul got passed ‘up the legal chain’, ending with his appeal to the Emperor and a long journey from Jerusalem to Rome under armed guard.

The Ephesians were probably aware that one of their own fellow believers had contributed to this chain of events. In which case they knew very well that the stone barricade in the Temple was indeed a ‘dividing wall of hostility’. Just the *rumour* of one Gentile passing through, and boom, the whole city was in riot.

The basis of this division was what Paul called ‘the law with its commandments and ordinances’ (2:15). In other words, there was an ‘us and them’ distinction because ‘we’ [the Jews] *did* certain things that ‘they’ [the Gentiles] didn’t do. These were things commanded by the law, particularly the ceremonial law. In this ‘us and them’ division, what the ceremonial law required for 8-day-old male babies took on a special significance – ‘you Gentiles by birth, called the uncircumcision by those who are called “the circumcision” ...’ (2:11). The holy things of God were only accessible to those who *did* the right things. Those who didn’t do the right things had to be kept out, by a stone barricade with menacing bilingual notices threatening death.

Paul says that this ‘dividing wall of hostility’ has been broken down ‘by the blood of Christ’, in other words, by Jesus’ death on the cross. Why? Because by dying on the cross, Jesus abolished all attempts by us to gain acceptance with God by our own effort, by *doing* certain things – ‘he has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances’. The cross is the great leveller – henceforth, access to God is to be through what *Christ* has done, and not what we choose to do by our own effort. Christ ‘[reconciles] both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.’ (2:16) Events recorded in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles dramatically demonstrate how ‘through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father’ (2:18).

Paul sees himself as the apostle especially charged with proclaiming this most amazing reconciliation to the world – he twice styled himself ‘the apostle to the Gentiles’ in his letters (Romans 11:14 and Galatians 2:8). The essence of his apostolic message is precisely this: ‘he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall [of hostility].’ (2:14) ‘The wall is coming down! The wall is coming down!’ The same sentiments as those expressed in Berlin on the night of 9th November 1989 ... a mixture of almost disbelief, and joy, that Christ has ‘created in himself one new humanity in place of the two.’ (2:15) At the end of this passage Paul uses two metaphors to refer to this ‘one new humanity’ –

‘In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord’ (2:21)

The force of the Greek word translated there as ‘structure’ is ‘household’ – a united *household* of God, and a new *temple*, where there is no ‘dividing wall of hostility’ – men and women are welcome into this household and this temple *not* because of what *they* do, but because of what *Christ* has done on the cross. In many ways, the ceremony at the beginning of this service is a perfect illustration of this truth. We have just welcomed little David into our congregation through baptism. Now, many outside our tradition find this practice of ‘infant baptism’ questionable – because David and others like him have not ‘made a profession of faith’ – they are not yet capable of doing so. But that is the point! Baptism to me is the outward visible sign of God’s welcome into God’s new household. Frances, in baptising David, was acting on God’s behalf, and on our behalf, to enact this unconditional welcome. The poignancy of infant baptism is precisely the fact that the little ones baptised are not yet capable of doing anything to make themselves acceptable to God – an absolutely perfect illustration of how Christ ‘has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances’. There is no longer any ‘us’ and ‘them’ – in this case, those who can or cannot make public professions of faith.

The ‘dividing wall of hostility’ in Jerusalem was physically broken down in 70 AD by the invading Roman army. The tragedy is that we have been putting such walls back up ever since. Historically, such man-made walls could still be very physical. Before the Reformation, many churches in our land would have had ‘screens’ separating the congregation from the altar. In big churches and many cathedrals, such screens would have been built of stone, harking back to the original ‘dividing wall’! Those incanting the mass in Latin inside the wall were deemed, by themselves and by those outside, to be nearer God than those outside the wall. Such *visible* divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are now, thankfully, a thing of the past.

But much more insidious are the *invisible* walls we put up to break asunder the ‘one new humanity’ that God has created in Christ. It seems that humans simply find it impossible to believe that there is really nothing we can *do* to make ourselves acceptable to God. It is almost as if we find it too humiliating to be accepted by God just as we are. So we put back ‘dividing walls of hostility’ – separating ‘us’ from ‘them’, those who dress and work and play and believe and worship like ourselves, and are therefore acceptable to God, and those who don’t, and are therefore less acceptable, if not downright unacceptable, to God.

Of all the implications of the Christian gospel, I suspect this is the hardest to bed down in us flawed humans. For example, Christ, by dying on the cross, has made peace between humans and God, and between humans. But many seem to think that only those who believe that Christ saved us *in a particular way*, for example, by so-called ‘substitutionary atonement’ or whatever, qualifies for the club of the saved – a ‘theological wall of hostility’ that re-creates an ‘us-and-them’ divide. If we are honest, and reflect on it but briefly, we will realise that we all create a forest of such ‘walls of hostility’, and they affect our relationships inside *and* outside the church in countless ways, invisible, but all the more insidious for that.

Building such walls is a laughable exercise if we look at it objectively. Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* brings this out memorably:

Why can't a woman be more like a man?
 Men are so honest, so thoroughly square;
 Eternally noble, historically fair.
 Who, when you win, will always give your back a pat?
 Why can't a woman be like that?
 ...
 Why can't a woman be like me?

Laughable when put this way, yes. But deadly serious, and seriously deadly, when we act it out. That was easy to say, wasn't it. But for me, as I suspect it will be for most of us here, it is probably easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than to act out the truth that ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male [or] female, for all ... are now one in Christ Jesus.’ (Galatians 3:28)

Geoffrey Faber, the grand uncle of the founder of the publisher Faber and Faber, expounds the practical implication more poetically -

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
 Like the wideness of the sea;
 There's a kindness in His justice,
 Which is more than liberty.
 ...
 For the love of God is broader
 Than the measure of our mind;
 And the heart of the Eternal
 Is most wonderfully kind.
 ...
 But we make His love too narrow
 By false limits of our own;
 And we magnify His strictness
 With a zeal He will not own.

Let us pray that with God's help, we all resolve to break down at least one dividing wall of hostility this coming week. Amen.