

Ephesians 2:11-22

11 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) –

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.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For **he himself is our peace**, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new

humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 **and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross**, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Reconciliation through Christ

Ephesians 2:11-22

Last week we were thinking about unity. Reconciliation is similar but a much bigger subject, there is so much in these 11 verses! In the context of this letter, for churches it was sent to, it was a disturbing and even shocking thing because Paul starts by addressing the crucial issue of the divide between Jews and Gentiles, which was one of total hostility. The one true God had only revealed himself to the Jewish people, and the Old Testament law, the Torah, forbade Gentiles to have anything to do with Him. And just to be clear, the Gentiles was *everyone else*. It was the Jews against the rest of the world. Intermarriage was punishable by death. The temple and its worship was completely out of bounds to Gentiles – a notice was excavated in 1871 which stated simply '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.' Israel had literally ring fenced itself off from the world, with God inside the fence. Or so they thought.

So the church, which contained some Jews but was largely made up of Gentiles, had *previously* been separate from Christ, as Paul puts it, without hope of a Messiah, and 'without God'. The Greek word used here is *atheoi*, literally atheists, whether or not they actually were! The Jewish Law described non Jews as worshippers of foreign gods because of their fondness for making statues and bowing down to them.

Ironically, later on Christians were referred to as atheists because they *didn't* make images of God!

John Stott in his excellent commentary points out that 'although *all* human beings are alienated from God because of sin, the Gentiles were *also* alienated from the people of God'.

So the main theme of Paul here is that Jesus has destroyed both of these barriers, between man and God, and between Jews and everyone else. And between other races for that matter, but more of that in a minute. The tragedy of course is that in 2021 much of the world still simply does not acknowledge the truth of this.

So many people remain *atheoi* - without God.

Here you can see the difference between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus revealed that the teachings of the Torah just reinforced divisions. One of the main uses of the Law had been, mistakenly, to preserve the purity of the Jewish faith. Paul says in Romans that the main intent of the Law was to convict the world of sin. Then Jesus came to remove the burden of that sin from the world. As Tom Wright says in his commentary, 'What Jesus has done is to make and declare peace'.

v 14 *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,*

Paul then goes on to say, in v 15, and this would have been seen as an outrageous statement, that *Jesus had set aside the law with its commands and regulations*. To clarify, what he means is the ceremonial law and not the moral law which of course still holds.

But we also know that because we cannot keep the moral law, our salvation can only come by faith. The law divides us, faith unites us. So the very fact of the death of Jesus on the cross, which ironically fulfilled the sacrificial requirements of the law, broke the system. God's promise to Abraham (in Genesis 12:3) that not all Israel, but *all people on earth* would be blessed through him was fulfilled when Jesus reconciled the *whole* of humanity to God, not just Jews. On the very day of his death we learn (Luke 23:12) that *Herod (a Jew) and Pilate (a gentile) became friends—before this they had been enemies*. An extraordinary footnote to the story.

So how does this relate to us now? As believers we're descendants of Abraham because we're reconciled to God through Christ. In today's world there's still massive division and alienation within nations and among nations. Many people flee their countries in fear, but as refugees and asylum seekers they're often hated and criminalised, even in the UK. And yet as I said before, the gospel of Jesus can and should bring reconciliation between all races and all cultures. If it was in any way otherwise it would not be of God at all. We've learned only this week that *if* we thought racism had been dealt with in this country, or anywhere else, we were very wrong. People of colour were aware all along that this was never the case. We're not as civilised as we like to think we are.

An anthropologist showed a game to the children of an African tribe ... He placed a basket of delicious fruits near a tree trunk and told them: The first child to reach the tree will get the basket.

When he gave them the start signal, he was surprised that they were walking together, holding hands until they reached the tree and shared the fruit! When he asked them why did you do that when every one of you could get the basket just for himself!

They answered with astonishment: Ubuntu.

“That is, how can one of us be happy while the rest are miserable?”

Ubuntu in their civilization means: I am because we are.

That tribe knows the secret of happiness that has been lost in all societies that transcend them and which consider themselves civilized societies!

And we're all complicit for allowing racism and hate to survive.

Paul says in Colossians that in Christ (3:11) there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ

is all, and is in all and Ralph Martin in his commentary on Ephesians

says, quoting Paul, that in Christ's body we have a new race of

humanity, one which has no regard for race at all, but is united in

Christ. And no one is unwelcome. This is the only hope for a world

which has turned away from God. The final part of Paul's argument

gives us three images of this new humanity.

Firstly God's kingdom. 19 You (Gentiles) are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people (Israel). God's kingdom is God ruling his people, and Jesus spoke repeatedly about the kingdom.

Our gospel today is the kingdom arriving. Sheep without a shepherd, hungry people fed, the sick healed. It's not an earthly thing, but a

spiritual community which transcends any boundary you'd like to imagine.

Paul writes this at the height of the Roman Empire and is contrasting the two kingdoms, God and Rome. in 2021 this comparison has even more weight.

2. God's family. 19 *You are fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.* So in one verse Paul brings it from a kingdom with citizens to a household with a family. That's the incredible nature of the family we are part of. A Father or Mother and children as brothers and sisters. Across every culture.

3. God's temple. 20-21 *[a church] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.*

The temple was the focal point of Israel's identity as the people of God. So it would have made sense that after Jesus there should be a new temple. But He cannot be contained by any building.

The foundation is the teaching of the apostles and prophets, primarily the New Testament, but most of all Jesus the cornerstone.

One cornerstone excavated from the original temple was 38 feet long. Jesus is the supreme revelation of God because He is God. His temple, the focal point of the people of God is now *not* buildings or cathedrals, it's the worldwide followers of Christ.

22 *in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

We are God's dwelling place. He lives in us.