

Sermon for Sunday 21st July 2024

8th Sunday after Trinity

By Peter Evans

Bible Reading:

Ephesians 2: 11 – 22

Jew and Gentile Reconciled Through Christ

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)— 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.



The Talk

For very random reasons, I was mulling over Alice in Wonderland the other day, and the things that it had inspired. Jefferson Airplane's White Rabbit from 1967 came to mind, as did the 1999 film, The Matrix, with its choice of a red pill or a blue pill, and a call to follow the white rabbit.

Much as I love the song and film, neither reference my favourite character from "Wonderland", the Queen of Hearts. You'd think with a name like that, she'd be kind, caring, compassionate and full of love. Big hearted.

But not a bit of it. More a psychopathic murderer— off with their heads being a common refrain. If you were looking to learn how to win friends and influence people, you would not choose the Queen of Hearts. In fact, she probably had no friends at all – they'd probably all be dead by now anyway. And best friends. Well. I very much doubt it.

Most, if not all of us, (unlike the Queen of Hearts) will have had best friends at some time or another. It tends to be more of a thing when we are younger, but it can happen later on and many people will have a close group of friends that enrich their lives.

These are people whom we know well, whose company we enjoy, whose values we share, and most importantly, people we trust. And that trust will be on several levels, not just to not misuse our credit cards, but trust that they have our best interests at heart.

And yet. And yet. It happens that we sometimes fall out with our best friends. There are three people in my distant past with whom the friendship was extremely close, best friends by any other name. And yet, they are friends from the past, not the present. At some point, for whoever knows why, they moved out of my life and dropped contact. There was no falling out. They just left my life. And it's sad.

And sometimes, and a bit more obviously, best friends will fall out. A misunderstanding perhaps, or a disagreement, or someone takes exception to what was said, and the hurt takes root, and then suddenly, or over time, the friendship, which was the best, has gone.

It happens in families too, often at stress points in our lives. I'm sure we all know of cases of estrangement and it can be hard to rebuild the bridges, if at all.

Chatting round with people after the service, it seems that falling out with friends or family is more common than you might think, and no one I spoke to thought this was a good thing.

The obvious thing to do is to rebuild bridges, to try to reconcile and restore the friendship or the relationship. And it's a hard thing to do, because it involves putting all pride to one side and making ourselves at risk.

These disagreements, these minor conflicts if you like, mirror what we see in the world around us. They all start small, sometimes a long, long time ago, but they can so very easily, escalate.

I started to make a list of conflicts, covering all sorts of categories. And there were so, so many, the list is huge. From conflicts within churches, through secular organisations like the National Trust, right up to ethnic, political, and national conflicts that sometimes dominate our headlines.

Here's just a few that I thought of. It's not exhaustive, or a top ten, or anything like that, but it shows how many disagreements turn into conflict. We don't have to look very far.

- Conflict in the Church of England over doctrinal issues
- Israel and Gaza
- Myanmar and the Rohingya Muslims
- China and Uyghur Muslims
- The Third Reich against the Jews and other minorities.
- Mao Tse Tung against anyone who could read or write.

And in our church's history, there are plenty of examples where our forebears have been the perpetrators rather than the victims. We certainly weren't paying attention to Ephesians 2: 11 - 22

Now, I must stress, disagreement and conflict are not the same. Disagreements that don't get resolved are what lead to conflict. The peacemakers need to move in early, but usually don't get the chance until the damage has been done. People like Henry Kissinger or Malala Yousafzai are often only able to get involved once the problem has become serious.

But what has all this got to do with this passage in Ephesians?

Well, this passage has its roots in conflict. It may not be obvious, but conflict is the reason it is here.

It's something of a passage in the shadows. Ephesians 1, which was part of the set readings last week, has that wonderful verse about being blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. And then the first part of Ephesians 2 is all about salvation being a free gift from God, not something that we can earn at all. Verse 8 is amazing: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God". And these two hugely important verses linger in the mind as we read on into chapter 2. And it's easy to miss the point of these later verses.

But Paul starts afresh at verse 11.

This conflict was rooted in one of the big doctrinal debates of the early church. Was the Gospel for everyone, or just the Jews?

The Jews regarded themselves as God's chosen race, and indeed, God made a covenant with Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 promising that this would be the case. And so from a Jewish perspective, it was a case of themselves, and everybody else, that is, the Gentiles – who were clearly not part of God's plan, or so they thought.

Peter believed, with some conviction, that the Good News was just for the Jews. Jesus was the next step in God's plan for His chosen people. Paul on the other hand, thought very clearly, that God's plan was to include everyone. And Paul put this into practice. He was prompted by the Holy Spirit to set up churches in Asia Minor, and this he did. This is why, aside from Romans and the personal letters, all of Paul's letters are to places in modern day Turkey or Greece. But at no point do we see a letter from Paul to the church in Jerusalem, for example.

This debate was one of the big divisions in the early church.

Fortunately, this debate was settled by God. In Acts chapter 10, Peter receives a vision from God (it's the one where he sees a sheet full of stuff being lowered down from heaven, all of which was considered unclean by the Jews) which clearly changes his mind, and the argument is settled. The good news is for everyone. This is something that we take for granted now, but it was a big deal 2000 years ago.

And this passage in Ephesians spells out the consequences of that vision. The Gentiles, who were far off, have been brought close and now there is no them and us. There is only us. Those in Christ have become one people and are now God's chosen people.

And as Peter later wrote in his first epistle, in chapter 2, verse 9:

For you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

In this passage in Ephesians. Paul makes it quite clear that Jew and Gentile are now fully reconciled in Christ. There is now no place for the enmity, animosity and hostility which had previously been present.

Now in one sense, this happened a long time ago, and actually, today, does it really have any bearing on this 21st century world?

And the answer if of course, yes. Jesus Christ reconciles. He heals. He unites and takes away the negative side of difference. In Jesus Christ, the differences no longer need to develop into conflict.

If we look at the long history of disagreement in the church leading to conflict, these were not rooted in Jesus Christ. Of course, we must work through our differences, and sometimes we must agree to differ. But there is no place for the pious self-righteousness of those who exclude others just because they think they are wrong. And there are many so examples over our many centuries as a church.

But there is a bigger picture yet.

This passage is not just about becoming one people in Christ. It is about being made right with God. Because the greatest act of reconciliation is between God and mankind, through the atonement of His Son, Christ Jesus.

There are some big words in there. But it boils down to this. The beginning of Genesis tells two stories. It gives an account of creation. And it tells the story of man's rebellion against God.

We, mankind, disagreed with God. We thought we knew best and with a little persuasion, that it would be fine to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Doesn't that just sum us up in a nutshell. Every parent can identify with that, as can all of us who are or have been children.

And then in the garden of Eden, we rebelled. We took our disagreement with God through to its natural conclusion. We ate of the fruit. We did what we wanted, as we knew best. Or so we thought.

And so mankind was now in conflict with God. And as a result we were thrown out of the garden.

And yet, we can be made right with God. This is what the long theological words mean. Jesus means we can be reconciled with God. If we are sorry and accept the forgiveness and salvation that is offered.

Through Jesus, mankind is reconciled with God.

There is a lot to take away from today.

There is no place for conflict within the people of God. Disagreement can have its place, it helps us form ideas and ultimately have a better understanding of our faith. And sometimes we have to agree to disagree. But conflict within the people of God has no place – we must remember that we are always one in Christ Jesus. Reconciled to God through His ultimate act of atonement.

But I don't think that it is enough to believe all this and go "that's all very nice then".

Sometimes, we have to do things as well.

Towards the beginning of the second world war, Coventry Cathedral was destroyed by German bombing. As the rubble and wreckage was being cleared away, some very large nails were found which had been used to hold roof beams together. The rector of a nearby church, Rev Arthur Philip Wales, decided to make three of these into a cross, and the cross of nails came into being.

Over the years, this cross of nails became the basis of a community, and this community has one purpose – reconciliation. And more crosses of nails were made as the community grew.

The Frauenkirche in Dresden, has one. St Nicholas in Hamburg has one. Both of which were flattened in allied bombing raids. And there are others too.

And the community is now larger still. Over the years, hundreds have been given to organisations around the world that are committed to peace and reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not easy. It requires genuine, open hearted repentance and forgiveness, on all sides. Reconciliation requires us to move away from hatred and resentment and bitterness, sometimes even before we can see that there is a better way ahead.

And that there is now a bond between the people of Coventry and the people of Dresden is surely a good thing.

Or that the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa led by Desmond Tutu, delivered so much. Also part of the community of the cross of nails.

Reconciliation is not easy, but it flows from the heart of God and brings so much goodness. And sometimes it needs us to play our part.

Jesus message is of forgiveness, love and peace. Let's be sure to live that in our lives. No matter how hard it may seem to be, it is always the better way.

Amen