

The Unity of Peace – Ephesians 2:11-22

Rivalry

In life, there are lots of different things that are in competition with each other. In rugby league, the biggest rivalry is the State of Origin with New South Wales doing battle against Queensland each and every year. In terms of car racing, I have always loved watching the Bathurst race and the great rivalry as to who was the king of the mountain was usually between Holden and Ford. Nowadays, people look at the technology battles with iPhone versus android, or the Mac versus PC. You might be able to think of lots of different kinds of rivalry and competition where people might work against each other. But, you know, even with this kind of rivalry, there is still a place where these groups can find common ground. The State of Origin is seen as the pinnacle of rugby league's competitions, and even though people might enter into it as mortal enemies, they all love to play on the biggest stage. Holden and Ford fans might hate each other but they love and respect the competition their opposition brings to the race. And it doesn't matter which kind of technology you use, it has all helped us to communicate and be productive in ways which were unimaginable only decades earlier. But when it came to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles¹, it wasn't simply rivalry, it was real division, real hate. Jews and Gentiles have continued to be at war, even as late as the 20th century with Hitler trying to exterminate the Jews and battles happening now in Palestine. Can you imagine any place where Nazi officers, concentration camp guards, and Jewish prisoners might find common ground? It would seem almost impossible, but not according to Paul. So, what was it that divided the Jews and Gentiles?

The Dividing Wall

Ephesians 2:11-12 *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.*

Paul is specifically addressing Gentiles at this point in the letter. They are called "uncircumcised" simply because they do not usually get circumcised like the Jewish men do. Circumcision is the Old Testament sign to say that this boy child is dedicated to God. It is meant to be a serious sign, displaying such commitment to God, so that if the boy does not remain loyal to God, he may be cut off from God like his foreskin was cut off and removed. For the Old Testament people of God, those who were uncircumcised were the outsiders. They did not know God, they had no relationship with God, they were not part of his kingdom, and could not receive any of the covenant promises of God. That is because they were not part of the covenant between God and his people. And I think that is the most important point to recognise here. Circumcision was just a sign of the covenant. The covenant was what governed the relationship. Much like a wedding ring is just a sign of being married. What actually governs the relationship is the definition of marriage and the vows people make in the marriage ceremony. Ultimately, for a Gentile to become part of God's Old Testament people, they had to become a Jew. They had to enter into the covenant to receive the promises of the covenant. They had to become God's covenant people and the sign for that was circumcision. This created hostility between Jews and

¹ Gentile is the title given by the Jews to everyone who is not Jewish.

Gentiles because it made the Gentiles feel like outsiders and unable to come close to God, even if they wanted to. It created a wall, a barrier, between the Jews and Gentiles. Paul tells us that Jesus broke down that barrier.

The Old Covenant

Ephesians 2:13-16 *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.*

Verse 13 tells us that those who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. This means that Jesus' death on the cross has something to do with breaking down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. But how does it do that? Well, let's look at the history of this covenant relationship.

It began with God making promises to Abraham. Promises of children who would become a nation, promises of land, fame, and blessings. Abraham's descendants became slaves in Egypt and God sent Moses to save them from slavery so that God would be their God, and they would be his people. Well, now that God had saved them to be his people, they needed to live like his people and not like the other nations around them, not like the Gentiles. God gave them the law, and this law pointed out how different they were to be compared to the Gentiles. They were to have godly values, godly standards, and a godly way of living. But there is one great problem with the laws of the Old Covenant. It not only pointed out how sinful the Gentiles were, it also pointed out how sinful the Jews were. In fact, the law condemned both Jews and Gentiles as sinners. They both needed to be saved from their sin. The Jews had their sacrificial system, but that did not really pay for their sin, it merely pointed to a time when God would provide a perfect sacrifice to pay for sin. Jesus was that perfect sacrifice. That is what Paul is talking about when he says that the blood of Christ has brought people near to God. We can only come near to God because of Jesus' sacrifice. Paul presses home the point in verse 15, when he says that Jesus set aside the law with its commands and regulations in his flesh. Broken law demands payment. Jesus paid it in his flesh as he died on the cross.

A New Covenant

Reading this passage like this could make it sound like covenants are bad. All God had to do was to find a way of abolishing the covenant and everything is fixed. But that is not completely true. It is worth remembering, that on the night before he died, Jesus reinterpreted the Passover meal. Instead of it looking back to a sacrificial lamb in Egypt, it looked forward to his own sacrifice the following day. Jesus said in...

Luke 22:20b *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*

The blood of Christ, which brings you near to God, is the seal of the new covenant. This means that anyone who follows Jesus and trusts in him for the forgiveness of his sins leading to eternal life is brought into a covenant relationship with God. The main difference between the old covenant and the new one is that Jesus provides real forgiveness of sin.

One Humanity

Understanding all this is very significant. Understanding that both Jews and Gentiles still needed saving from sin, means that the barrier was not as big as they thought it may have been. It also tells us that there is no point in the Gentiles becoming Jews before they become Christians. Lots of Jewish Christians thought this way. They thought that you had to become part of the Old Testament people of God in order to become part of the New Testament people of God. But if Jesus' blood provides the payment for sin, then it doesn't matter whether that sin is done by a Jew or a Gentile, Jesus still pays the penalty for their sin. There is no difference between them. That is why Paul could say...

Ephesians 2:15b-16 *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.*

The one body is Christ's body. There are not two different sacrifices for sin, just the one sacrifice, Christ's sacrifice. That sacrifice reconciles both Jew and Gentile to God. Last week, we heard...

Ephesians 2:10 *For we are **God's handiwork, created** in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

We spoke about being a new creation, no longer dead in our sins, but made alive in Christ. In verse 15, we are told that the purpose of the cross was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two. So, again, Paul is talking about us being a new creation, a new humanity. It is like Jesus is reversing the Tower of Babel. Instead of people being divided by language and moving away from each other, they are being brought together as one in Christ. Paul emphasised this idea in the last part of our passage.

Peace and Unity

Ephesians 2:17-22 *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 peace between Jews and Gentiles only comes about because of the peace Jesus brings between God and humanity. Last week we heard that we were dead in our transgression and sins, and that we were deserving of God's wrath. This week we hear that the blood of Jesus paid for our sins so that we can be reconciled to God. So, because sin has been dealt with, then we not only can have reconciliation with God, we can have reconciliation with each other. The thing that once divided us is no longer there, and that peace that we are supposed to have with God and each other is supposed to be seen in how we relate to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. So, we are no longer enemies, strangers, and foreigners to each other. We are supposed to be brothers and sisters, members of the same household. Paul uses another analogy. He said that we are like a building, a temple. There are foundations and cornerstones which are used to build the building. Once the building is completed, there is not only unity, there is the Holy Spirit, there is God dwelling with his people.

It sounds almost too good to be true. The idea that God brings his people together, no matter what their background, so that they form one people, one church, seems to be beyond reality. Lots of churches are not as

integrated as they could be. Sometimes it is because of language. People struggle to understand God's Word when it is not taught in their mother tongue. Sometimes it is because of culture. The way different cultures do things means that we can be more comfortable staying with the culture we know and understand. Sometimes it is because we simply don't like it when things are different to what we like or expect. And so, our churches are not as ethnically diverse as they could be. Now, we could demand that ethnic and language churches should shut down, and that all Anglican churches be run in English, but I think that would make the gospel harder to understand and be less effective for people from culturally diverse backgrounds. So, it may well be that we do not see this ideal of all peoples and all languages worshipping God together at the same time until we are all in heaven. But that does not mean that we are completely divided either. What unites us is Christ, not the building, not the denomination, not the time that we meet. For, we are all sinners who need Christ's forgiveness. Therefore, it doesn't matter how diverse we are, or where we go to church, we are still one body, united in Christ. He is the common ground, not the building.

Having said that we may not always be in the same building, worshipping God at the same time, there have been amazing examples of people who should be enemies being united in Christ. I remember a missionary showing a photo of some people who were singing together, praising God, in church. This missionary pointed out that in that photo there were Cambodians and former soldiers of Khmer Rouge worshipping together. You have to understand that the Khmer Rouge had tried to destroy the Cambodians. It is estimated that between 1.5 to 2 million people were murdered by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979. Yet, this photo showed former enemies being united in Christ. This photo showed that Christ's forgiveness is real and it has a real impact on people. So much so, that they were now calling each other brothers and sisters in Christ.

I wonder, what could divide us today? What could cause us to feel threatened or concerned about being united in worshipping God together in church? I'm a bit worried about how people might treat each other regarding the issue of vaccination. It is a hot topic at the moment, and I know people on both sides of the debate are concerned about what church will look like in the future. Will it be a safe place for everyone to come? And who is it that will be making it unsafe? We have to remember that our safety, our security, is found in Christ, not in a vaccine. Over the next few months, maybe years, we are going to be tested, and we could divide as a church over our stance on vaccination. I pray that we will work together to find the best outcome for our church and to never forget that no matter what our beliefs about vaccination maybe, our identity must be found in Jesus.

Finally, we spoke earlier about how Gentiles were the outsiders in the Old Covenant. Now, Jews and Gentiles can come near to God, but those who refuse to come near are still outsiders. Maybe you feel like you are an outsider. If that is the case, then you have a choice to make. You can choose to come near to God through Christ, but you can only come to God through Christ. After all, he is the one who made the great sacrifice to pay the price for your sins. Don't be an outsider anymore. Turn to Christ and become part of his family.