

“IN IT TOGETHER – 5”
Breaking The Barriers
Ephesians 2:11-22

The world is full of barriers – physical, psychological, ethnic, gender-based, religious, financial and so on. Some of them are impressive – The Great Wall of China, Hadrian’s Wall, the Israeli wall around the Palestinian territories, Trump’s Great Wall of Mexico. Some are real but invisible, some imagined but still cause hurt and harm. But pretty well all of them are designed to keep people (or things) out. They are symbols of division, of discord. They are signs of our fallen humanity. Division is not what God intended, but sadly it’s part of his way of dealing with the way in which his perfect world became riddled with evil. In the very beginning, in the immediate aftermath of humanity’s first and most devastating act of disobedience, God put a barrier round the east of Eden – cherubim with flaming swords. Not long afterwards, the divisions within humanity itself were heightened by the confusion of languages at Babel. And down through history the story of the human race has been characterised by division and conflict – the very thing we are remembering today with much of the rest of the world as we mark the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the worst war in human history.

But this is not what God wants. This is not what he intended when he created this amazing world and put in it human beings who were to work together with him and in harmony with each other. The presence of evil and the way that has infected humanity in the form of sin, has distorted and perverted God’s good and perfect creation. The gift of free will which he gave his much-loved creatures has been used for the wrong purpose and has contributed to the fragmentation of humanity as we have made wrong choices and wrong decisions. Barriers are all symptoms of that profound problem of human sinfulness and selfishness. We want to keep what we’ve got for ourselves and exclude others from stuff that we believe is just for us.

And once again in the passage we’ve read this morning, Paul tells us of how much God wants to put it right and what he has done to begin that process. Remember, Paul has written this letter from his prison cell in Rome to encourage and inspire the new Christians in the churches around the eastern Mediterranean. His colleague Tychicus has come to Ephesus with the letter, the first stop on a short tour of the churches in what is now Turkey where the letter will be read out in each of the churches as they gather for their weekly worship. These churches were made up of people grappling with a new-found faith – mainly Jewish people who were starting to see how Jesus was the Messiah they’d been expecting for centuries, the culmination of their story of faith, but with a few Gentiles, non-Jews, who realised that Jesus was part of the plan for them too.

And as Paul tries to explain how God wants to remove the barriers between humanity and God and between people themselves, he takes as an example the biggest barrier of all for many of these new followers of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah – the barrier between Jew and Gentile. I don't know if you've noticed as we've been reading through this letter, but Paul switches from "we" to "you" and back again throughout the letter. When he is using "we", he is addressing the Jewish believers, of whom he is obviously one. "You" is the way he talks to the Gentiles. And in this passage we've just read, the point is that the "you" are becoming part of the "we". God is wanting to break down that particular barrier – and that has big implications for us still today.

You see the Jewish people were very much the people of God. That's how they saw themselves and that's how God treats them. The promises he made to the patriarchs, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were all about how God had chosen them to be a part of his plan and was going to bless them so that they could be channels of that blessing for the whole world. He gave them their own land and protected and guided them through the wars and conquests and exiles that are described in their Scriptures, our Old Testament. They saw themselves – and still do – as special. And it was the Gentile races who were apparently excluded from all that. That wasn't God's plan, though. It's clear from what God said to the Patriarchs and what he said to his people through the preachers and poets and prophets of the Old Testament era that he expected the Jewish people to share the blessings, to reach out and embrace the other peoples as part of his overall plan to restore things to their original state. Sadly, that didn't happen and the Gentiles ("you" in v12) were excluded from the benefits of being part of God's people and thus left without hope and without God.

But the Jews had also lost sight of what it was all about. They had wanted to take all the blessing for themselves and had ignored or forgotten the mandate they'd been given to share God's love with others. They had found themselves swamped and suffocated by a mass of humanly constructed laws and minor regulations – all designed to help them stick to what God wanted, but somehow missing out on the spirit of it all. So now there was this huge gap that had developed between Jew and Gentile – exemplified to some extent in the rite of circumcision, which Paul uses here as a way of distinguishing between the two sides, and demonstrated in such things as the total exclusion, on pain of death, of Gentiles from some parts of the Temple, and the tight laws on who could eat with whom. Some of that had carried over into the new churches as Jews were suspicious of Gentile believers and Gentiles were resentful of their new Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.

Those barriers are not so stark today, but there are plenty of others as we find ourselves looking with suspicion or resentment or judgement on others because of their gender, their wealth, their sexuality, their

past, their education, their mental state and so on. What Paul is writing here about Jew and Gentile is still very relevant in our own situation. And key to the understanding of all this is the part that Jesus plays.

That's where Paul goes as he acknowledges the sense of exclusion and lack of hope that many people were experiencing. After he has talked about that hopelessness and separation from God that the Gentiles felt in v12, there's yet another of his "Big But's". "***But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away [Gentiles, beyond the barriers] have been brought near through the blood of Christ***". Jesus has come to sort it out. If you read through the parables of Jesus with this background in mind, you can see how he himself was pointing towards this sense of reconciliation and new-found unity. Through his death on the cross, his sacrificial blood sacrifice, Jesus has "*destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing the law with its commandments and regulations*". Jesus has done away with the barrier, the rules and regulations that excluded the Gentiles from experiencing the blessings of his people. As someone expressed it, "*The rules and regulations put up the fence, but love moved it.*"

William Barclay in his comments on these verses relates a story that Rita Snowden had heard from the war. In France, some soldiers with their sergeant brought the body of a dead colleague to the cemetery to have him buried. The priest asked them if the dead man was a baptised Catholic and they said they didn't know. The priest replied that he was very sorry, but if he wasn't definitely a baptised Catholic he couldn't be buried in the churchyard, so the soldiers took him and reluctantly buried him outside the fence. The next day they came back to check everything was OK with the grave, but they couldn't find it anywhere. As they were leaving the priest came up and told them that he had been so troubled by what he had told them that he got up at first light and came down to the cemetery and, with his own hands, moved the fence beyond the new grave to include in the graveyard the soldier who had died for France. That is what Jesus did, in a sense. He moved the fence put up by the rules and regulations and brought people into a religion based on love.

But even that story is an inadequate illustration because the death of Jesus didn't mean that now Gentiles could become Jews. We are not incorporated into that old system, kind of making up for lost time, as it were. Paul says that the idea was that God would "*create one new man out of the two*". Both Gentiles and Jews are transformed through Jesus Christ. As *The Message* translates this verse, it's "*a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody*". No-one could "pull rank", as it were. The Jews couldn't rely on their heritage to put down the Gentiles; and the Gentiles couldn't look down on the Jews because they were now included. John Chrysostom was one of the great preachers of the Early Church (his name means "Golden Mouth") and he put it like this: It was "*as if one should melt down one statue of silver and another of lead and the two together should come out gold*".

You see, once again God is restoring us to what it should have been in the beginning, before anyone was a Jew or a Gentile, in the brief period of Arcadian bliss when humanity lived in harmony with each other and all people were in a relationship of love and unity with God. (Paul explains this a bit more fully in *Romans 4* if you want to follow it up.) God's original plan was for a world with no barriers, with no fences, with no-one excluded or belittled or disadvantaged. And that is what he is now – since the death and resurrection of Jesus – gradually putting into place. When Jesus returns and God puts all things to right, then we will be able to enjoy that state of harmony for all eternity, but for now we just catch glimpses of it.

Which is why what Paul goes on to say is so vitally important for us in a fractured and fragmented world. Now that we have heard the message of peace that Paul talks about in *v17* and all have access to the Father through the Holy Spirit – we are reconciled to God, restored to what we were intended to be – we are “*fellow citizens*” with everyone else who has responded to that message. As we get closer to God, so we get closer to each other, like the spokes of a wheel or the ribs of a vaulted ceiling. Indeed, using the image of a building, Paul tells us that we are now all “*being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit*”. All those who have heard and accepted the Gospel, the good news that Jesus has died to reconcile us to God and to each other, are engaged in this project to become a living temple in which it is obvious that God is at work.

Do people see that when they look at Wade Street Church? That God is active and making a difference in our lives individually and together? Do people see that when they look at Churches Together in Lichfield? When they look at the churches of this nation? When they look around the world? Not always, it has to be said. And shamefully, our history is a catalogue of division and discord, of religious wars and often unspeakable violence. We can't change history. We can't really do a lot about the bigger barriers in the worldwide church. But we can work hard to ensure that this little manifestation of God's people who meet here each Sunday and work together during the week is a place where others can see that God is at work, not least because we're all doing it together.

How do we do that? Well, Paul says that we are to “*build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*”. We're not starting this from scratch. We are keeping to the tradition of those who have gone before, the great men and women of God who have themselves been so close to him that we can try and emulate their way of life. The “*prophets*” are the great figures of the Old Testament, those who preached about the activity of God being obvious in the desire of his people for justice and righteousness, who said that what counted was not a lot of religious rules and regulations, but lives dedicated to the worship of God and the service of others, particularly those who found themselves left behind in the struggle for dignity and equality. And the “*apostles*” are those whose lives are documented and whose teaching is

recorded in the New Testament, those who lived out their relationship with Jesus in such a way that others were affected and their lives transformed. We've got a whole book of all that stuff here to help us get the foundations right, a book we can study and from which we can learn about how God wants us to behave, what the values of his Kingdom are, what should be the defining and distinctive characteristics of the followers of Jesus.

But what's the main component in this barrierless building? What really holds it all together? What is our most important source of inspiration? "*Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*" It's Jesus who is at the very heart of all this. I don't profess to know anything about architecture or engineering. Countless episodes of *Grand Designs* have delighted me and awed me, but I still don't understand how it all works. But I am told that in the kind of building with which Paul and his first listeners would have been familiar, it was this one stone – the cornerstone or the keystone or capstone – which really held everything together. This is what gave the building shape and stability and was absolutely indispensable. In other words, what Paul is saying here is that the most important – the indispensable part – of this building is Jesus. Without him at the centre the whole lot falls apart. Without our eyes fixed on Jesus we will find the barriers creeping back up.

Do you see what Paul is saying here? Through your faith in Jesus and your commitment to follow him, you are now part of God's people – God's people who have been recreated, moulded together from both Jews and Gentiles, transformed by the Holy Spirit. There are no barriers in God's eyes, so there should be none in yours. And we need to be demonstrating that by the way we live as God's people, as disciples. Others need to see that, to be able to look at us and spot that there's something different – a sense of inclusion, a love that is indiscriminate, an atmosphere of unity. We need to be working, worshipping, witnessing without barriers. The barriers of age, gender, education, wealth and so on which appear to characterise so much of the culture in which we are immersed should have no place here. Others should be able to see that this is "*a dwelling where God lives by his Spirit*". May that be our prayer and our practice day by day.

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But the Jews had wanted to take all the blessing for themselves and had ignored or forgotten the mandate they'd been given to share God's love with others. So now there was this huge gap that had developed between Jew and Gentile and some of that had carried over into the new churches as Jews were suspicious of Gentile believers and Gentiles were resentful of their new Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.

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We are to "*build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*". But "*Christ Jesus himself is the chief cornerstone*." It's Jesus who is at the very heart of all this. The most important part of this building is Jesus. Without him at the centre the whole lot falls apart. Without our eyes fixed on Jesus we will find the barriers creeping back up.

To think about and discuss

- 1) What are some of the most obvious barriers in our world today? And in the Church?
- 2) In what ways were the Jews God's "chosen people"? Do you think they still are? Why/why not?
- 3) In what way is Jesus Christ "*our peace*" (*v14*)?
- 4) What does it mean that we are "*members of God's household*" (*v19*)? Do you feel like that?
- 5) How can we best be "*a holy temple to the Lord*"? What might that mean for our church?