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War and Peace

Ephesians 2 v 11-22

Introduction

I'm trying to read War and Peace. It's enormous, and I'm a slow reader so it's taking me a long, long time. But it's a story of contrasts, as the title suggests. It follows several families as they deal alternately with sons going off to war and possibly to die, and living their high society lives in Moscow and Petersburg. No matter how much they think they're insulated from it, war keeps intruding.

We thought we had seen the back of wars near to us in recent years. Things looked pretty peaceful, at least close to home. And then Russia invaded Ukraine and there was war in Europe. And the situation between Israel and Palestine kicked off. Suddenly war is one of the main topics of conversation.

And it's causing division, isn't it? People supporting one group and people supporting the other. It's much more complex and nuanced than that, but we live in a polarised world. In politics you're increasingly either on the left or the right. In religion you're seen as a compromiser or an extremist. Each new ideology that comes up, you're expected to take sides.

How do we resolve this? How can we bring people together that consider each other to be sworn enemies?

Well Paul had the answer, and in our passage today he talks about the amazing power of Christ to break down barriers and bring people together.

Background

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is written to a group of believers in a large, multi-ethnic, multi-religion city. Ephesus was a melting pot of Romans, Greeks, Jews and others, and people from all walks of life had come to follow Jesus. In chapter one Paul tells us God's plan in all this:

> *making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. [Ephesians 1 v 9-10]*

God's plan was for unity. And he was going to bring it about through his son.

Two Becomes One (v11-19)

When we get to the middle of chapter 2, Paul acknowledges the difficulty of bringing people together. In particular the Jews and the Gentiles (non-Jews). Paul calls them the "circumcision" and the "uncircumcision". He uses words like "hostility", "strangers and aliens", "separated". From the time of Abraham there was a division, between God's people and the other nations. Look at verse 11 and 12:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. [Ephesians 2 v 11-12]

There was a separation, marked by a physical sign, circumcision, but also by cultural, religious and legal differences. The Jews lived under a covenant, a promise by God that if they followed his law he would bless them. The Gentiles had no covenant, no promise, no law to follow, no God and no hope.

Until the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ came to them.

The good news wasn't that they could become Jews. That wouldn't have helped their situation much. The good new was that God had sent his son to bring in a new covenant, a new promise, a new hope, and a reconciliation with God, for both Jew and Gentile. His plan was to unite all things, and he was uniting Jew and Gentile by bringing both to Christ.

In doing so, God showed them his great exchange shop. Look at all the things Paul says they had before that have been transformed into what they have now:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. [Ephesians 2 v 13-16]

One new man in place of two! Where there had been Jew and Gentile there was now Christian. Saved by grace through the blood of Christ shed on the cross. This is God's plan for unity, and we call it the church. This is the way of peace, that those who were aliens, strangers, enemies, could now be brothers and sisters in Christ. We think that diversity is a new thing, that people from different countries and cultures coming together is something unusual that we're having to deal with in the modern world, but in Paul's day the church in Ephesus was full of Jews, Romans, Greeks, masters and slaves, men and women, people from all walks of life. They weren't comfortable with it back then either, but God's plan was unity. And not by bringing them all down to the same level but by lifting them up:

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [Ephesians 2 v 17-19]

Look at what we now have through Jesus:

We have access to the Father - even the Jews at their best only had a limited access to God. They came to the temple with their sacrifices and offerings, gave them to the priests who represented them to God, and only the high priest, once a year, was permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies, through that curtain, into the presence of God, and only by the blood of

the sacrifice. Now, because of the sacrificial blood of Jesus, we can come into the presence of the Father, confident not in our own goodness but in the righteousness of Christ.

We are fellow citizens with the saints - the word saint comes from the Latin "sanctus", meaning holy. The Jews had a great respect for the old testament saints: Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Daniel. Now Paul says that we can consider these people our peers! We are fellow citizens, part of the same kingdom. There is no gentiles quarter, we are all in Christ made citizens of heaven.

And we are members of the household of God - not only citizens but family! The members of the church in Ephesus were brothers and sisters in Christ and so are we. Brought into the family of God by adoption.

Growing a Temple (v20-22)

And now Paul takes a swivel. When he talks about the household of God he of course means the family, the people in the household. But he changes tack here and starts talking about a building. Look at verse 20:

> *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone [Ephesians 2 v 20]*

This is no longer a flesh and blood household, it's a bricks and mortar one. Figuratively, because Paul is still talking about the Ephesian Christians as part of this structure. They are stones in the building - living stones - and the foundation is the apostles and prophets: God's word given to his people by his people. And all of this rests on Christ Jesus, the cornerstone. And what is the purpose of this building?

> *in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.[Ephesians 2 v 21-22]*

God has chosen us, the church, to be built up into a place of worship for him, a place where he dwells. Like the tabernacle in the wilderness. Like Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, rebuilt after the exile, a place of beauty, full of details that point to the majesty and holiness of God. But there's one significant difference in this temple…

Years ago I read another book, not quite as long as War and Peace. It was a science fiction novel called The Practise Effect. It featured someone from this world who stepped through a portal into another universe, where the laws of physics were subtly different. In this world if you use something it wears out. A saw gets blunted; your car tyres wear smooth; your shoes get scuffed. In this other reality the more you use something the better it gets. You could start sawing away with a bit of string and gradually it would harden and sharpen, getting better at doing its job. You wouldn't buy a perfectly engineered car, you'd just throw together an old heap that just about worked and over time it would improve into a smoothly running, reliable vehicle.

The point is that that's not how things work in this universe. But it is how people work. If we want to be strong we practise at lifting things and our muscles grow. If we want to be a good musician we practise and practise and we become better.

And this temple of people is built differently from he temple of stone.

When the Jews were building the temple, they started with rough stone, cut in the quarry. It was then shaped and smoothed until it was a perfect fit for its position in the temple. By the time it got to the temple building it was already perfect. In the record of Solomon's temple being constructed we read that there was no sound of tools at the temple site:

When the house was built, it was with stone prepared at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the house while it was being built. [1 Kings 6 v 7]

What about us? Does God cut us out from society, shape us and smooth us until we are a perfect fit before he slots us into his living temple? Not according to Paul:

in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.[Ephesians 2 v 21-22]

The growing happens once the bricks are placed. The Ephesians *are* being built together, while still imperfect. God places us alongside other Christians and we *don't* fit together perfectly. He knocks lumps off us, shapes us and smooths us as we live and worship together. This is why churches are often messy, why they can be painful. We're not finished yet. But don't get downhearted. Paul reassured another group of believers in Philippi:

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. [Philippians 1v 6]

How long will that be? We don't know. Maybe as long as it takes to read War and Peace when you can only manage a couple of pages a day.

Summary

A poet, taking a look at modern life, once said "We make buildings when what we need are bridges". Paul looked at the world in his day and saw the same problem. There were divisions everywhere. But God had built a bridge, in the cross of Jesus Christ, and that bridge has been bringing people together for centuries. People who normally would never come in contact with each other: different nationalities, languages, cultures, classes and political views.

And now that the bridge has brought us together we strive together to build a temple. A living temple made of people whose lives glorify God, and who are the dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. We know it's not perfect yet, but we trust him to keep working in us.

As a final thought, we need to be careful with our language. The very word "church" is often misused to mean a building. Sometimes it's called the house of God. Some people in our church even refer to the main hall we use as the "sanctuary" - the holy place. There is nothing holy about the building we meet in. God doesn't live there: he lives in the people. He used to dwell in the temple, but no more. Remember what Jesus said to the woman at the well in Samaria, when she asked which mountain was the right one to worship God from:

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, [John 4 v 23]

When Jesus died on the cross, and the veil was torn in two, it was the end of the age of the temple of stone, and the beginning of the age of the church: God's temple made of people. May we serve, honour and glorify him as we work together as his temple.