

Ephesians Series – Sunday 22nd July 2018

This morning our Epistle looks at the second chapter of Ephesians, Verses 11-end. Last week and Becky focused on the blessings to be found in Chapter one....but I want to begin by following on Becky's encouragement to you to read the Epistle through yourselves. It has been called the 'crown of Paul's epistles'. It is full of 'pearls of great price' but they have to be dug out! Can you find time to read small I want to focus on our Epistle from Ephesians. Becky introduced the sections at a time – prayerfully, reflectively and slowly...so that you think about each phrase before moving on the next. If you do this, God will produce a pearl for you gaze at and treasure. A pearl heightens its colour when it is warm and held close to the body. As you hold the phrase/verse that has struck you, allow its riches to illuminate your understanding. This will take you deeper into God's love and generosity for you. The result – you will be blessed... this book contains the living words of the living God – and this letter takes us to the heart of the 'Good News'. Exciting.

There is one word that might sum up the epistle for today, chapter 2: 11-end and that is ALIENATION. It is a word used about issues in our society as groups alienate/separate themselves from one another. One group feels superior, privileged the other feels disillusioned and powerless to change things. This is dehumanising. The result = division and separation with a breakdown in relationships. Not hard to think of modern examples –the gap between rich and poor, gender issues, tensions between people of different cultures, faiths and denominations, etc. Some work to reform, others plot revolution and sadly some just drop out.

Paul is drawing out another example of alienation ... that between Jew and gentile. The construction of the TEMPLE IN Jerusalem makes an incredibly strong statement about the place of the Gentile. At the heart of the temple was Court of the Priests. Here in the Holy of Holies the Ark of the covenant rested. Here God dwelt. This was behind the altar on which the sacrifices were offered by the priests. Then came the Court of Israel where male Jewish worshippers brought their animals to be sacrificed. Then came the court of Jewish women. All of this is for Israel. All 3 courts were at the highest level. Than lower down came the court of the gentiles. Should a gentile trespass into the Jewish area death could result. The prohibition was absolute. (Plaque)

Gentiles were heathens, despised and rejected. Now think carefully what the Jew Paul is saying in our reading, "remember at one time, as gentiles by birth, you were called the 'uncircumcision' by those who are called the 'circumcision'...you were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel –and also without Christ and having no hope" (v. 11-12)

Paul is saying that you were separated not only from God but also from each other. There was no unity, no harmony between you and the Jews, no relationship, no hope. In reality you were completely stuck where you found yourselves as gentiles. It is same today for people locked into the slave trade, gang culture, domestic violence and other loveless environments.

What changes this? Verse 13, 'But now (and it is a big 'but') but now, you have Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace'. If you were a despised /rejected gentile what would that say to you? It would be mind-blowing. It is revolutionary. The whole social structure of the day is being changed/turned upside down. (No wonder Christians met opposition from the Jews because the fabric of their faith and belief is being attacked/altered and worse still - this is done by a Jew, Paul himself).

It is hard to see how the father of the Jews, Abraham, could be a blessing to the nations by the way that things had developed at the time of Jesus. But now, "in Christ" (such a popular phrase in the Epistle) in Christ" both groups have been made into one. The 'dividing wall and hostility has been broken down', Verse 14. Peace indeed.

What has shifted this? Paul makes clear the turning point is the life and death of Jesus. The sacrifice of the Son of God for the sins of the world has arrested the alienation – has stopped the two sides being dragged into deeper and deeper division – sucked in a vortex. The sins of man, the sins of nations have been put to one side and forgiven and a new path has been made by Jesus. But it means that power is no longer found through the laws of Moses – so crucial and important for the well-being of the Jews and Pharisees in particular. That Law with its commandments and ordinances has been **abolished**. Now there is a new law The law of love and the Cross illustrates that sacrificial love in action. The way forward might be summed up in the Sermon on the Mount

TO create a new humanity, Jesus abolished the commandments and ordinances, verse 15 in order to create a new humanity. At the heart of Jesus was the burning desire to bring reconciliation and end alienation. As Paul says earlier in the chapter, 'for by grace you have been saved through faith'. This grace is available to all. The response of both Jew and gentile must be the same – that is FAITH. It is a powerful and rich sentence – another pearl here in the letter! Take time to value and absorb it as you read the letter slowly, reflectively and prayerfully.

It is hard for us to fully appreciate what dynamite is behind these words of Paul. He is exploding a deeply held view which had sadly created a group of people who saw themselves as superior and despised those not of their number.

(Sadly the state of modern Israel continues the alienation. A Christian tourist used these verses of hope from our Epistle as a prayer...as he looked at the wall now going through Bethlehem)

How do we move on? Paul points the way. Paul is saying we have got to start again for we are all part of the one building where Christ is the cornerstone. The Cornerstone is the last stone at the top of the building. It needs to be placed very securely for if it falls the whole building could begin to tumble. Christ is there holding the whole building together – creating a unity and harmony between people in love.

So we have this picture of Alienation from God and from others ... which Christ transforms through his sacrificial love – breaking down the division and creating a unity – drawing peoples together as was intended from the beginning. (eg. Berlin

wall coming down. Church Army bus In tough areas – broken lives pieced together again through faithful witness . Challenge to us)

I end with a true war time story. Some soldiers had brought the body of a friend who had been killed to a Church to bury their comrade. The priest asked if the dead man was a Catholic. The friends had to admit that he wasn't and the priest refused to let them bury him in the Churchyard. So they went and dug a hole the other side of the Churchyard fence and laid their friend there. When they came back the next day they could not find where they had had dug the hole. As they were about to leave perplexed and sad the priest came to them. He said his heart had been deeply troubled by his refusal to let them bury their dead comrade so he had got up in the night and move the fence to include the body of one who had died for others. That is what love can do. Rules and regulations put up the fence, love took it down. That is exactly the role of the Church, of you and me in society...to pull down fences and replace them with love in our families, in our communities.