

The grace that creates one people

Ephesians 2:11-22

If I were to ask you to summarize the significance of the cross,
I'm pretty sure I know what some you would say,
you would say something like,
'the cross is where Jesus paid the penalty that our sins deserve'
And you would be right!

But then if I were to push you and ask 'and how else can we describe the cross?'
some of you might say
'the cross is the ransom that Jesus paid to redeem us from sin's slavery',
or 'the cross is the peace offering that Jesus made to reconcile us to God'.
And again bot those answers would be correct.

But then if I were to push you again and ask
'But what difference will the cross make for us this week?'
Some of you would say 'Um, the cross helps me know that I'm saved'. Correct!

But again I might push you and ask
'but what difference does the cross make to the way we treat others?'
Then some of you might say;
'The cross reminds me to be generous, as Christ was generous to us.'
'The cross reminds me to act sacrificially, just as Christ did'
And again you'd be right.

The cross can be viewed from many different angles, can't it?

What I appreciate about today's passage
is that it presents an angle on the cross
that is not given as much air time as others.

Now, I know that I've said something similar a few weeks ago.
When we we're speaking about *adoption*,
I said that the picture of adoption
isn't one that we often use to speak about salvation.

The fact that today we have another underutilized angle
is evidence of the importance of preaching from every part of the Bible,
and of systematically working our way through books and passages;
we discover new gems once we move off texts that are old favourites.

And today's gem is that the cross brings peace between groups of people.
Just as Christ established peace between us humans and our creator,
so too has the cross brought peace between peoples

who otherwise might be at war with one another.

We live in a society which values multi-culturalism,
and Paul is saying that the cross is the way multiculturalism is achieved.
This passage is one place where the impulse of our culture
and the life of the church ought to find some alignment.
It's nice when we can point to a passage in the Bible
and say to our society "See here is how we can achieve what we're after!"

There is a very neat logic at work in our passage;
it divides quite nicely into three movements marked on the sermon outline:
Paul begins by describing the way things were, vs 11-12;
then he moves to explain how things have changed, vs 13-18;
and finally he outlines the consequences of this change, vs 19-22.
"Formerly ... But now ... Consequently"
are the three terms that he uses at the beginning of each section.

So what was the situation before the cross?

Paul explains: 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)—¹²remember 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.

Before the cross there was real racial division in the world.

Back in the Old Testament,
God had selected just one nation to have the honour of being his people.
The nation of Israel,
the nation who's members were able to trace their ancestry back to Abraham,
they were the one's who were given the promised land,
they were the ones who were called children of God.
Everyone else was a gentile—a foreigner—
and it was made clear that foreigners did not enjoy the same status.

One of the ways the difference was expressed was through circumcision;
Israelite men were circumcised as Abraham was circumcised,
while men from other nations remained as God had created them.

But the division was never meant to be completely hostile.

The Israelites were instructed
to be very welcoming of foreigners seeking shelter within their country.
And if a foreigner wanted to convert to Judaism they were able to do so
provided the men were circumcised and the families started following the OT.
And if a Jewish person paid close attention to the OT,
they would have heard that it was always God's plan
to bring in the other nations at some point.

However, by the time of Paul's writing,
 it seems as this flexible attitude had been lost.
 He mentions the name-calling that used to go on between the two groups.
 Gentiles weren't known as *Romans*, or *Carthaginians* or *Gauls*.
 They were simply known as *the uncircumcised*.
 In other words, "They're not us." "*Who are they? Not us.*"

"Who are we?" the Jews would ask,
 "We're the circumcised; the ones who have the special sign of God's people."

And you get the sense that Paul is a little uncomfortable
 with the excessive focus on circumcision,
 not because it concerns a private part of a man's anatomy,
 but because the practice had been elevated
 to be way more important than it was ever meant to be.
 We have this statement in brackets in v11 reminding his readers
 that circumcision was done in the body by human hands.
 Yes it was done by the command of God,
 but it was only ever an external, human symbol.
 What really made an Israelite was their trust in God's promise.

So we have this sense of division that was present in the wider world,
 but it was also festering in the hearts of people who should've known better.

What do we see in the world around us?
 Do we see the same unfortunate sense of division in our world today?
 In a word, *yes*, we do!

Here's a headline from the ABC news website on Friday

Undercover recordings capture hotel staff racially segregating guests

Management at a popular hotel run by Australia's largest hotel group has been directing staff to segregate Aboriginal people into inferior rooms while charging them the same price as other guests, an investigation by the ABC has revealed.

Employees at the Ibis Styles Alice Springs Oasis were instructed to direct guests from 'the communities' — a local expression describing Aboriginal people from out of town — into one of six designated rooms.

So, 2000 years after Paul wrote to the Ephesians,
 the issue of racial prejudice is still with us here in Australia.

But surely this is not a problem for modern churches!
 I remember attending a church in Atlanta, Georgia,
 and while I saw plenty of black people in Atlanta,
 not many were in the church I attended.
 I attended a church in New York City, and there were lots of white people,
 and lots of Koreans, but not much more diversity beyond that.

Here in Australia there are plenty of churches that are monochrome.

But it's not just race that can divide a church;
 We can have divisions regarding *class*, divisions regarding *age*.
 These are issues that the NT also speaks into,
 class issues in the book of James, age issues in Paul's letter to Titus.

Division is always a possibility,
 but when it occurs it's a sign that we have forgotten the cross.
 In his next section, Paul teaches that the age of division is now over,
 because of what Jesus achieved when he died.
 But now in Christ Jesus, Paul says in verse 13,
 you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Governments all over the world have tried many different methods
 to achieve harmony between people groups.
 Opening up economic and trade relationships is one way,
 education is another,
 but God's own way was to have Jesus die on a cross.

How did Christ's death bring racial harmony?
 From verse 14 Paul explains that Christ's death
 both *removed an obstacle* and *uncovered a new path*.
 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.

As we've discussed, it was the OT law
 that made quite a clear distinction between people groups.
 One distinction was that *Israel* was the nation
 who received the sacrificial system to help them engage with God.
 But now that system has been put aside because of Christ's death.
 The national system of sacrifices
 was only ever designed as a stop-gap measure
 until Jesus made the one true sacrifice.

And once this one true sacrifice was made,
 it was revealed to be the one, universally accessible path that leads us to God,
 from the second half of Verse 15: 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.

When Christ died as a means of reconciling sinful humans to a holy God,
 he did so as the representative of all human beings,

not just as the representative of the ancient Israelites,
and so Christ creates one new humanity,
a humanity that has peace with God by faith in Jesus as its chief characteristic.

You know how when you arrive in a new country
and you're at the immigration desk, there are two lines?
One for those holding a local passport and one for those who are foreigners?
That's nothing like entry into the church.
It's nothing like entry into God's eternal nation.
There is one gate no matter what culture you have come from,
and only one passport that will gain you access:
and that's faith in Jesus and what he has achieved on the cross.

It's interesting, at the beginning of the sermon I spoke about
how the cross effects our behaviour towards others.
The two examples I gave—generosity and sacrifice—
have the cross as their inspiration, as the *example* to follow.
but when it come to living together as one people,
the cross is the actual *instrument* that makes it possible.
Christ unites us by providing a sacrifice effective for all, available to all,
really by being the only means for anyone to find friendship with God,
and so it becomes the common means by which all Christians
establish their faith.

And once we enter through that gate and enjoy that friendship
there are implications for how we understand those
who may have arrived from a different homeland.
If Christ has made us one people,
then we are no longer *foreigners* but *fellow citizens*, verse 19:
Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers,
but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.

When you do find yourself in a foreign country
it's always a nice moment
when you hear someone speaking a familiar language
or speaking in a familiar accent.
I remember eating in a NY diner
when I heard a table of Australians eating at the table next to me,
I remember visiting a tourist spot in central China
when I heard an Australian voice behind me.
These were people I would never have anything to do with back home
but in a different context that shared citizenship creates a bond.
You're from Australia, I'm from Australia!
And so it is with our shared citizenship of heaven.

One of the most moving Christian moments I have experienced was

attending a church service in the city of Taiyuan, in Shanxi province in China. It was all in Chinese so I didn't know what was being said, but sharing in Holy Communion at the end, as everyone sang a chorus of *alleluia* I knew what *that* was about and I was moved to tears as I was able to participate.

Why was I able to participate? Because of the truths contained in verses 20-22

This was a church built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ It was a church joined together In Christ and risen to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² It was a church built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

We had the same Spirit,
We were depending on the same cornerstone, Christ,
Our belief was based on the same apostles and prophets,
and so we were able to enjoy unity, not division.

One of the oldest ministers in Sydney who is still alive, Keith Marr, he would be well into his 90s, he tells the story of when he was a prisoner in the Changi POW camp during WW2. They had a roughly hewn chapel that the prisoners could use, but it was out of bounds after dark. Anyway, one evening Keith decided he would go the chapel to pray anyway. And as he was praying he heard the door swing open. And as the footsteps of the Japanese Guard made their way down the aisle, Keith thought. "This is it, I'm done". The guard stopped where Keith was seated, and said, in broken English, "You Christian?" Keith replied "yes". The guard then said "me too", and sat down and prayed next to him. They prayed in silence, and the guard left. Where governments fail, Christ succeeds. *Fellows*, not *foreigners*.

I want to end with a question. Given the cross creates unity and not division, when it comes to church life, are you a binder or a divider? I'm sure you've all made use of a stationary cupboard at some point in your life, within that cupboard you find instruments that divide (scissors, folder dividers, this guillotine) and you also find instruments that bind (tape, staplers, binders).

We are all instruments in God's hands,
and so we each have the potential to divide our community,
or we can make efforts to ensure we are bonding together.
As we meet together, are you in the habit of reaching out over divides
or are you staying put in your comfort zone?
And reaching out to bond with others is not just us being friendly,
it's putting the effects of the cross into action.
So I encourage you to bind, and not divide.

Let's pray.