

## **Ephesians 2:14-18**

**...so close**

### **Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

In ancient Egypt they made the Israelites live in a segregated land called Goshen, and then started murdering their newborn children

In Nazi Germany they started by making the Jews wear stars of David, and then sent them to Auschwitz.

In 1960s America they made the black people ride at the back of the bus. And since 1977 80% of people executed in the USA have been put to death in cases involving a white victim, even though only 50% of murder victims are white.

Until 2003, Malaysia enforced discriminatory laws limiting access to university education for Malaysian citizens who are ethnically Chinese, and many other laws explicitly favoring ethnic Malays remain in force

In Britain the nation's most senior police officer said, just a week ago, that murders in minority communities, with a handful of exceptions, do not attract anything like the same media interest as murders of white people.

You don't have to go very far in the world before you encounter discrimination and exclusion.

43 years ago Martin Luther King had a dream that one day "little white girls and little black girls" would "walk together as brothers and sisters." Well in the city where Anthony Walker was murdered just 6 months ago for no reason other than a group of people taking exception to him being black that remains just a dream – some would say a pipe-dream.

Most of the time, fortunately, the norms of society mean that we don't go around murdering people of other races (or indeed of our own race). But when those restraints break down, as they did in Rwanda in 1994, ordinary Hutu's went and butchered 800,000 Tutsi – not in an organised campaign but in spontaneous hatred and mob violence.

You don't have to go very far in the world before you encounter discrimination and exclusion. And that kind of behaviour, and those attitudes, have pervaded humanity through history.

The Bible records that the immediate result of our alienation from God, brought about by

human rebellion and God's just judgment, is alienation from one another.

The battle of the sexes, sibling rivalry, tribalism and the warmongering of the nations are all a result of our attempts to place ourselves at the centre of the universe. Put another way they are all symptoms of our spiritual death.

If you've been with us over the last few weeks you'll recall that this section of Paul's letter to the Christians in the city of Ephesus, in modern day Turkey, breaks down into two major sections:

#### **1-10: Our relationship with God**

- a) What we were like (1-3)
- b) What God has done (4-7)
- c) What Christians are like now (8-10)

#### **11-22: Our relationship with others**

- a) What we were like (11-13)
- b) What God has done (14-18)
- c) What Christians are like now (19-22)

In the first 10 verses we have seen that the human race is spiritually dead, that we are enslaved to our own desires and thoughts, unless God, through Jesus Christ, raises us up to new and totally undeserved life. Because of this grace Christians are now to live a life of goodness, reflecting the glory of the God who rescued us.

Last week in v11-13 we saw how, before the coming of Jesus Christ, the nations of the world were excluded from being part of God's people – Israel. Apart from the Jews every human being was outside of God's covenant family. The only way to be included was to become Jewish. To take on a Jewish cultural identity and all the rules, regulations and rituals of the Jewish national law – God's covenant with Moses.

The ancient world could be divided into two camps – the Jews and everyone else. Jews and Gentiles. The rivalry between Jew and Gentile was legendary. Because of the horrors of the holocaust we tend to think of it being Gentiles who have wickedly persecuted Jews. But the reality is that throughout history there

has been plenty of two-way traffic. It was part of the Jewish man's regular morning prayer to thank God that he had not been born a slave, a woman or a Gentile. Jewish children were taught that the standard way to refer to Gentiles if you were Jewish was as "dogs" – unclean animals. There was a lot of prejudice and unpleasantness on both sides.

But the fundamental distinction between Jew and Gentile wasn't a distinction without foundation. The fact is that God did have a relationship with the Jews, his people, that everybody else was excluded from.

If you were a Gentile you were, v12, without God and without hope in the world. You were outside of God's promises. The distinction between Jew and Gentile was one that, at a most basic level, God himself had brought about. In fact he specifically told his people to live lives that were distinctly different from those of the Gentiles around them.

The Jews were on the inside – they were God's covenant people. The hatred the Jew felt for the Gentile may have been inexcusable but that does not mean that Gentiles were alright really. V12 tells us that anyone who was not a Jew was without Jesus, without citizenship in Israel, not included in God's promises, without hope and without God.

And Paul has made it clear that he wants us all to remember and never forget what we were before Christ reached down to us, so that we may not forget how great his love and grace is.

But Jesus has changed all that. The very heart and centre of Jewish religion was the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. In the middle of the temple was the most holy place, where the box containing the 10 commandments, given by God to Moses, for his people was kept. This was where the Jewish high priest came once a year with the blood of a bull and a goat to make atonement for the sins of Israel. It was the only place in the world that God had said people could go to for their sin to be forgiven.

Outside that was the court of the priests, then the court for Jewish men, then the court for Jewish women and finally, some way out, down a series of steps and through what was in Jesus' day, a 10 foot thick wall, was the court of the Gentiles. They were separated from the rest of the temple, from the presence of God and his forgiveness, by a wall.

In 1871 archaeologists found some of the signs that were built into this wall. They read:

*"No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have only himself to blame for his ensuing death."*

In fact just a few years earlier, Paul, the author of this letter, had nearly been lynched by a Jewish mob who thought he had violated such a notice by taking a Gentile called Trophimus into the Jewish part of the temple.

Trophimus' home? Ephesus, the destination of this letter.

But Jesus, v14, has destroyed that dividing wall. Although when Paul wrote this letter the wall was still physically standing in Jerusalem, spiritually it was no longer of any significance.

How has Jesus done this? V15. In his flesh, which is an expression to describe Jesus' death on the cross, in his flesh Jesus abolished all the regulations and commandments of the law of Moses that separated Jew and Gentile.

The laws that God gave Moses of Moses, especially the laws about what foods the Jews were able to eat and with who, effectively meant that Jew and Gentile could never be together. They were not able to mix. There were not only spiritual but social and physical barriers between them.

My good friend Jason Clark, who will be preaching in two weeks time, and his wife Linda have orthodox Jewish friends in their home town. They do all sorts of things together. However they cannot eat a meal with them. Because Jews are not allowed to eat with Gentiles.

But Jesus, through his death on the cross has abolished those regulations. There is no longer to be a distinction between Jew and Gentile. The dividing wall has been broken down.

Especially in our individualistic culture we can tend to think that the message of the gospel is all about making ME right with God. But the message of the gospel is really about Jesus being king, being Lord of a whole people. God's plan is to create a new human race, over whom he is ruler. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two.

In bringing us from death to life, from darkness to light, from being under God's judgment to being his people Jesus has also made all who believe in him one new people. That is why Christians are brothers and sisters to one another. We are united in Christ. There

is no place for spiritual superiority of the Jew – because all are saved through Christ. There is no need to become Jewish any more to be part of God's people. Because both Jew and Gentile need to become Christian to be part of God's people.

The cross, v16, puts to death hostility. Hostility between people who come to the cross for forgiveness and God. And hostility between people who come to the cross for forgiveness and other people.

Jesus, v17, brought the same message of peace to Jew and to Gentile. That is to those who were near, the Jews, because they were already had God's promises and law, and to those who were far away, the Gentiles, who knew nothing of the one true God.

Jesus brings the same message to all. There is no room for pride or arrogance because the message of Christ is the same to everyone; we come to God through the cross of Jesus or we cannot come at all. Because of Jesus both Jew and Gentile have access to the same God, through the same Spirit.

I guess most people here have never questioned that they have the same access to God whether you were born Jewish or not. But if you lived in the first century you would have found that absolutely earth shatteringly shocking. Jews thought that for Paul, a Jew, to say Gentiles could now have access to God by trusting in Jesus without becoming Jewish as massively offensive and blasphemous. Gentiles were astonished that the God of Israel, who had seemed so distant, could have included them in his plans. Many Christians, over the first decades of the church found hard to grasp that you could really be one of God's people without becoming Jewish. That's why so much of the New Testament is written to warn people that they must not go back to the laws of the Old Testament.

Because the result of that was always that the church became a place of spiritual elitism – of first and second class Christians. And, more than that, it was a rejection of the fundamental truth that there is no distinction amongst God's people – all who trust in Jesus are made one new humanity, reconciled to God through his cross.

You don't have to go far in our world before you find discrimination and exclusion. But you should not find it amongst Christians. Paul himself spells out the implications of this teaching very plainly for us in Ephesians 4 in his instructions to the local church:

*"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body..."*

Lots of people seem to want to take these verses and use them to justify what the Stock Exchange might call strategic mergers of different church groups. As if having one human Chief Executive and one brand image for churches across the world would be the answer to Paul's plea for unity. But what Paul is asking is much more challenging than some sort of mega church merger. He is asking us, as Christians in our local church to accept and love one another and not to make people feel excluded and discriminated against.

Because of what Jesus has done on the cross the most different groups of people imaginable – Jew and Gentile, can be united. If they trust in Jesus they become heirs together of God's kingdom, members of the same body.

So the questions for us this morning is: is that how Christ Church is? Are the different people welcomed? Are the people who may seem to you spiritually inferior made to feel like part of the same body? One of the big issues in the first decades of the Christian Church was that some of the Jewish Christians would not accept Gentiles as Christians unless they came on their terms – they had to eat Jewish foods, respect the Sabbath and be circumcised. In other words they wanted Jesus PLUS their cultural baggage before people would be accepted. Are we like that? Do we accept people as members of the same body because they believe in and love the Lord Jesus and strive to hold to his teaching or is what we really want for people in Christ Church that they be like us?

Maybe you are one of our older church members – by which I mean over 22. And to be honest you're fed up with students. They eat all the cakes, they all wear the same hooded tops so you can't tell which is which, they run you over with their bikes in the car park and to be honest you'd really like some more families and some older people in the church instead. Well tough. Jesus has abolished the wall of hostility and brings a message of peace. Not just not fighting with each other (and goodness knows enough churches don't even manage that!) but peace meaning restored relationship. Peace with God doesn't just mean that we are not his enemies any more. It means that we are his friends. His children. His beloved ones. And that's what it must mean for us with each

other too.

Socially we are a very middle class church. Almost everybody here has a degree or is studying for one. We cannot change that. You can't undo being a graduate any more than you can undo being Jewish. But if you're here this morning and that's not your background you can expect us to love you and include you in our church family just as much as anyone else. And of course that cuts both ways too – you have to accept these posh doctor people too, however irritating they may seem.

That's one of the reasons why on Sundays we meet all together. And why our meeting are open to anyone. I wouldn't discourage anyone of any race, gender or background from coming to our church. We are not a student church, or a middle class church or a white church. We take whoever God gives us. That doesn't mean we can't have Sunday School for children, and men's and women's events and student lunches. But it does mean that those things should never be the centre of what it means to be church.

Whoever you are, this morning, if you are a Christian you have the same access to God as anyone else here. Whether they are Asian or European, male or female, school leaver or post-doctoral researcher, whether you are a church leader or became a Christian yesterday. There is no place for discrimination or exclusion amongst us.

So please, if you ever feel hurt or excluded by someone talk to them about that. If you feel discriminated against in the church family, come and speak to the elders. We don't always get it right, but we do want to.

Having said all that you may be here this morning and not be a Christian. Well can I say to you that in that case you should feel excluded. Not at all socially or in the way people treat you. But because unless you are a Christian, unless Jesus is Lord of your life and centre of your world you are not part of the family.

But hang on a minute, you may say?

Isn't that just the same as it was before? Haven't we just swapped Jew and Gentile for Christian and non-Christian? Well yes... and no.

The human race is still split into two. But now the distinction is not ethnic. You don't have to become Jewish. All anyone has to do is believe and trust in Jesus. Being a Christian does not require anyone to change their

cultural identity. There are Christian churches, displaying the glorious diversity of human creativity in every nation in the world. And the door is open to anyone.

In next week's passage we discover more about what it means to be part of God's family, his household. But just for now take a look around and see that this is God's family. If you're not a Christian I'd urge you to join the family. Simply by accepting God's grace in Christ, saying sorry for your rebellion and allowing him to be king of your life. If you are a Christian this IS your family. How do you treat them?

God, in Christ, has done an amazing thing. He has destroyed the most fundamental barrier in the world – that between Jew and Gentile. So there is no reason for us to erect barriers between one another – and every reason to enjoy relating to one another as brothers and sisters.

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