

**Title: He is our Peace**  
**Text: Ephesians 2:11-22**  
**Date: July 24, 2011.**  
**Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron**

While Sue and I were on holidays in South Australia, our daughter Emily was enjoying a school trip in Germany. She was there for three weeks and didn't send us a single postcard. Nor did we receive an aerogramme – remember those? But we did have 'face time' with her. Through the incredible technology now at our fingertips we were able to see and talk to Emily via video chat on our phones using wi-fi, all completely free. Amazing.

We live in a global village made possible by the wonders of modern technology. We live in the world of www – the world-wide-web. And so my neighbour is no longer the person at the end of my street but also the billions who are now connected with me to the internet.

But here is the rub. Even though we live in a world where deep connections across geographic, political, ethnic and religious borders is more possible than ever before – our world is still deeply fragmented and divided into a series of insiders and outsiders, us and them.

Palestinians and Israelis are divided by an iron wall.

Two decades ago in Rwanda Hutus and Tutsis acted out genocidal enmities that make no sense at all to us. For years in Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics made a mockery of the faith they both profess. Sunni and Shiite Muslims continue to kill and maim each other in barbaric ways.

It seems that in our sin-stained and fallen state there is xenophobic tendency in all of us that tragically can overflow into full-blown racism and violence. Xenophobia is the sometimes intense, always irrational fear or dislike of people from other countries, cultures or creeds.

Most of us like to assume that we're enlightened, tolerant, and unprejudiced people; that we don't suffer from xenophobia or have a racist bone in our body.

A recent study published in the Wall Street Journal reveals many of us have a hidden bias against anyone with a foreign accent.

According to the study, "The less familiar an accent is to us, the harder we have to work, and the less trustworthy we perceive the information to be."

It gets worse: "Researchers found that the heavier the accent, the more skeptical we become." In other words, if it sounds like you're not from around here, my suspicion radar is on high alert. My bias about you isn't based on your character; it's based on the fact that you talk "different."

Our suspicion or bias might not be based on how a person talks, but how they look – the colour of their skin or the clothes they wear.

Insiders and outsiders. Bias and suspicion. Us and them.

If our world is a global village made possible by technology, the 1<sup>st</sup> century world was a global village made possible by the Roman Empire. At its height the Roman Empire was made up of 60 million people, hundreds of cultures and covered most of Europe and large parts of Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa. The roads the Romans constructed enabled mass migration and mobility on a scale unheard of before. In particular people flocked to the cities in search of work. In these cramped cities cultures and races that had little experience of each other now lived side by side. Fear and violence would often erupt in the form of deadly riots that would be ruthlessly crushed by the Roman army.

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The Roman Empire of Jesus and Paul's day was in many ways a deeply fragmented society of 'us and them' held together by the ruthless economic, political and military might of Caesar.

Of particular interest to us today is the divisions that existed between Jews and non-Jews, or Gentiles. It seems that in the two to three centuries leading up to and after Jesus' birth a level of suspicion and distrust developed between Jews and the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. The suspicion went both ways. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote this:

The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor.  
(Tacitus)

In the Jewish writings, the Book of Jubilees, this was the attitude towards non-Jews, or Gentiles:

All their ways are pollution and an abomination and uncleanness. They offer their sacrifices to the dead. They worship evil spirits. They eat over the graves, and all their works are vanity and nothingness. They have no heart to understand.  
(Book of Jubilees)

Us and them. Bias and suspicion. Insiders and outsiders.

This context makes the emergence of the Christian church all the more remarkable, because it was made up of those who were formally estranged from each other – Jews and Gentiles alike. But sometimes old habits die hard.

Without doubt the biggest controversy in the early church was not about sex or politics or gender roles or money. The biggest debate was about circumcision – about whether a person could become a Christ follower without becoming a Jew first, the outward sign of which was circumcision. There was in the church a faction called the 'Circumcision Party' who pressured Gentile Christian converts to be circumcised. Their thinking was, 'You are not a real Christian until you become a Jew first, until you are circumcised.'

And so, surprise-surprise, even in the church there was 'us and them', 'insider and outsider' divisions. Paul could not, and would not stand for it. Let's read what he said to the Ephesians:

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)— remember 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.  
(Ephesians 2:11-12)

Paul acknowledges the name-calling that is going on in the church. Names and labels separate and divide. After acknowledging the divisions in the church he goes on to say to his Gentile audience, 'Remember what life was like BC – before Christ. Remember what you were, so you know what you now are.'

Paul pulls no punches:

- One, they were once separate from Christ,
- Two, they were separated from the nation of Israel – God's chosen people.
- Three, separate from Israel, they were excluded from the covenant promises Israel enjoyed.
- Four, without Christ they were without hope.
- Five, they before Christ, they were separated and completely alienated from God.

The Greek word that is translated as 'without God' is atheos, which comes from the root word for atheist. The Gentiles were not so much atheists in what they believed about God, but in that they experienced the complete absence of God in their lives.

One Bible scholar summarizes life before Christ for these Gentile believers:

(The Gentiles were) Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless and Godless.  
(William Hendrikson)

That was them before Christ, and that is us before Christ. Let's read on. Paul begins with a glorious 'but':

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.  
(Ephesians 2:13)

But now you who were once alienated from God, who were atheos – without God – have been brought near and close to God through the blood of Jesus. Make no mistake; the sacrificial and bloody death of Jesus –the Cross of Christ – is fundamental to our relationship with God.

Put simply, because Jesus died, we can live.

Because he endured punishment, we escape it.

As the cross a spiritual transfusion took place; Jesus blood was poured out with sacrificial love and that enables us to receive the life-transforming power of God.

Paul goes on:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.  
(Ephesians 2:13-16)

Paul is saying that in our sinful and fallen state there is a barrier, a dividing wall that separates us from God and from each other.

This is the Temple in Jesus and Paul's day. A Jewish pilgrim coming to worship at the temple would walk up the southern steps that were three stories high, stopping to ritually cleanse themselves in the baths that dotted the steps. Once inside temple mount they would see to the north the temple platform.

The pilgrim would then climb fourteen steps, reach another platform, before climbing another five steps before entering the court of women. Beyond this point only men could proceed to the Court of Israelites where they would watch the priests sacrificing animals on the altar in the Court of Priests. Beyond the court of Priests was the Holy of Holies where the chief priest on one day of the year, Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – would make a sacrifice for the people of Israel.

This large open area here outside the temple platform was the Court of Gentiles. Dividing the Court of Gentiles from the temple platform was a 1.5 metre high stone wall beyond which no Gentile, no 'non-Jew' could proceed. Recent archaeological excavations have found Greek and Latin inscriptions that were affixed to this wall which translated say, 'Trespassers will be executed.'

This wall was a barrier, a dividing wall of hostility. Gentiles could stand in the court and look up at the temple, but could not approach it. If they passed this wall they would surely be executed.

With this imagery in mind, Paul says that in and through Jesus, the dividing wall of hostility that separates Jews from Gentiles and Gentiles from God has been destroyed.

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Paul is saying that Jesus' sacrificial death is a once and for all time and for all people sacrifice.

He is saying that it no longer necessary for the High Priest to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people to atone for their sins because Jesus, our High Priest, has laid his life on the altar and shed his blood for us so that we might have full and for free and for all time access to God our Father.

When Jesus died, in the spiritual realm this wall and this wall and this wall all came tumbling down!

The other barrier that separates us from God that and that Paul alludes to is the requirements of the law. Let me be clear, Paul is not saying that the law, like the Ten Commandments, is bad. But what he is acknowledging is that the overarching requirement of the law to live a holy life before God is impossible for sinful humankind to keep.

But here is the Good News! Jesus our High Priest lived a perfect and sinless life, the only person to fulfil the requirement of the law. Jesus died a sacrificial death that absorbed the curse of judgement that rests on each and every one of us because we break God's law – because all of us are sinners who have fallen short of God's standards for us. In an earlier letter Paul said this to the Galatians:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.  
(Galatians 3:13)

He is our peace.

Speaker and author Gordon MacDonald was approached after preaching one day by a Nigerian woman who wanted to complement him. She introduced herself using an Anglo name. MacDonald responded by asking what her African name was. She immediately gave it to him. The name was several syllables long with a musical sound to it. MacDonald asked her what was the meaning of the name. Let me read what followed:

She answered, "My name means 'Child who takes the anger away.'"

When I inquired as to why she would have been given this name, she said, "My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they loved each other so much that they defied the family opinions and married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. Then my mother became pregnant with me. And when the grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave me. I am the child who took the anger away."

It occurred to me that her name would be a suitable one for Jesus.

He is our Peace. Jesus is the one who takes the anger away. Jesus defeats the curse of sin so that we can live full and free lives in the presence of God. Through his death and resurrection a new community is created called the church in which there is no longer any division.

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.  
(Colossians 3:11)

Let me be clear; Paul is not saying that when we become Christians we lose our cultural distinctiveness. Women are still women, men are still men, Jews are still Jews, Kiwis are still Kiwis and South Africans still barrack for the wrong rugby team. I love the cultural diversity of our church where we have more than 30 different birth nationalities represented. This diversity makes for a very beautiful and rich tapestry.

What Paul is saying is this; that in Christ all inequalities, all divisions, all hostilities all enmities are destroyed once and for all.

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At the foot of the Cross of Christ we find level ground. In Christ we are equal.

Let's finish with a couple of more verses:

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.  
(Ephesians 2:17-18)

Here is a little quiz for you. In Luke's gospels and John's gospel, what were the first words that Jesus said to his disciples after his resurrection when he encountered them all in one place?

Jesus said, 'Peace be with you.'

The peace that Jesus preaches and offers us is not simply the absence of conflict. The absence of conflict is at best, partial peace. The peace that Jesus offers and embodies has its roots in the Hebrew understanding of shalom. In the Bible shalom is equated with righteousness, justice, salvation and the reign of God. Simply put, shalom is the way life is meant, and God designed it to be. Shalom – peace – is a gift of God.

But here's the thing. Jesus offers us his peace, but he does not force it on us. Like the disciples, we choose to receive his peace or not.

Paul tells us that Jesus himself embodies peace – that he is our peace. But Jesus does not force himself on us. We choose to receive Jesus into our life by faith. To not receive him is to reject him and the peace he offers.

Nothing will change what Jesus has done for us. But everything changes when we receive what Jesus has done for us. Everything changes when we live in the freedom and peace he offers us.

A couple of years ago there was a fascinating article in the Wall Street Journal about the Iron Curtain that once separated Eastern and Western Europe. The Iron Curtain came down with the Berlin wall two decades ago.

For years the Iron Curtain, which was mostly a fence, separated two populations of red deer living in the forests on the border between Germany and the Czech Republic. When government officials began to dismantle the fence, the physical barrier between those populations was removed.

Thirteen years later, when wildlife biologists began studying the deer, they quickly realized that the deer living in Germany were not migrating into the Czech Republic, and the deer living in the Czech Republic were not migrating into Germany. In other words, both populations of deer were still behaving as if the fence remained intact.

One deer was given the name Ahornia by the researchers. Her movements in the forests of eastern Germany were tracked for several years by a GPS collar fitted to her neck. During the time she was monitored, Ahornia's location was tracked more than 11,000 times in Germany—but not a single time in the Czech Republic. She was tracked at the border of the two countries many times, but she never crossed over.

Two elements of Ahornia's story are particularly noteworthy. First, she was born years after the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the fence that comprised the Iron Curtain. She has no physical memory of the fence's existence, and yet she is still blocked by it. Second, the land formerly occupied by the fence and its guard towers has now been turned into a large and thriving nature preserve. In other words, the land beyond the fence has become a haven—the perfect home for deer like Ahornia and her family—and yet she will not enter.

Biologists have come up with several explanations for the deer's strange behaviour. Most deer travel across traditional trails, for example—ones that are passed down through generations by modelling and repetition. It's possible that Ahornia and the other members of her herd simply haven't ventured beyond the beaten path.

But a wildlife filmmaker who often works in the area, has a different explanation. He said, 'The wall in the head is still there.'

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'The wall in the head is still there.'

Like the deer on the border of Germany and the Czech Republic it is possible for us to live as if the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility between us and God still exists. The wall is still in our head and heart. What a tragedy if that is the case! What spiritual adventures, what freedom, what liberation - what life we sacrifice as a result!

Make no mistake, Jesus destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility that separated us from a holy God and which represented our alienation from each other. That wall did not fall two decades ago, but two centuries ago. That wall has been destroyed in and through Jesus!

The moment that Jesus died Matthew's gospel tells us that the earth shook violently, tombs were opened and corpses walked the streets and that the curtain in the temple that separated the Court of Priests from the Holy of holies was torn from top to bottom. It was ripped asunder.

From the moment of Jesus death onwards there is no barrier, no dividing wall between us and a holy God. We can approach God with confidence and joy. How? By receiving by faith the peace that Jesus offers us. By believing with our hearts and confessing with our lips that Jesus alone is Lord, that he lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death and that three days later he triumphed over sin and the grave and death itself, and that he did this for us and the whole creation.

No longer do we need gaze on God's presence from afar. God has drawn as nearer than a heartbeat to us. No longer do we need to live alienated from God and each other for he is our peace.

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.