



# Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

## Brought near by Christ

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### **Ephesians 2:11–22**

“<sup>11</sup>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)—<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup>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, <sup>16</sup>and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup>He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup>For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

One of the great themes of our faith is how we are brought into the presence of God by Christ. I want to explore with you Ephesians 2:11–22. In setting the scene, let me draw your attention to the fact that it is set in the same pattern as the previous passage—it contrasts the ‘before’ and ‘after’ picture of the Christian life ... there are, however, some differences:

- previously it was individuals—now it is a group
- previously it was about behaviour—now it is our standing before God
- previously it was the power of resurrection—now it stretches back to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

The marvellously concise epistle is also a comprehensive summary of the good news and its implications:

- it tells us what God has done for us in Christ
- it addresses the struggle for meaning on the broad canvas of life
- it has a central theme that all things are created for ultimate unity in Christ
- it assures us that in a divided world, a vision is cast of a gathered unity.

Most of the early church was Gentile rather than Jewish. Whilst there were some Jewish Christians, then as now, it was a very small group. Paul wants his readers to discover the encouragement that can be found in their Jewish roots.

The word ‘separation’ awakens emotions in all of us. Whether it is the unfortunate breakdown in human relationships, religious divisions or people distanced from loved ones ... you can feel the power of the word:

- we meet people who refuse to communicate with someone with whom they have disagreed
- we have listened to the cries of those damaged by others ... most pain has some human involvement
- the hurt of not belonging to the right 'in' grouping can be intense. This has its powerful message for any church community.

Fred Craddock is one of the finest practical teachers on the art of preaching. He comes from a Presbyterian tradition and tells of preaching one Sunday—and the innocent reference to some forks on a dinner table demonstrated the pain in human relationships. The word opened up a whole area of hurt.

We can see in the contemporary world scene, the on-going challenge of the Middle-East, the continuing fear and futility of terrorism and the political ferment of threats coming from North Korea. You may be thinking, 'How does all this relate to this passage?'

- v.11—the human race was divided into two—'the circumcised and the uncircumcised!'
- v.12—As Jesus Christ the Messiah belongs to Israel, so Gentiles had no natural access
- v.12—the implications were understood to be enormous ... excluded!

As people, we need the welcome of Christ to bring us into the kingdom of God.

TEXT: Ephesians 2:13

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

There are walls of division where we see the hurts of the human race in clear focus. The death of Jesus Christ is God's message to such divisions and is a word to us today, as well as to the people of the first century. One commentator chose the title 'The New Humanity' for his exploration of the theme, and I find that quite helpful. This revelation is the explanation of God's 'but now'.

The last decade of the twentieth century saw some of the walls of partition disintegrate. The Berlin Wall, the curtain of iron or bamboo around the world, and humanly constructed barriers of race, colour, tribe and class. There is so much more to be done, but we do not ignore all that has been achieved.

My visit to China points to something fresh and new that is happening in our day. Only twenty years ago, it would have been unthinkable to imagine what is now taking place.

In v.11, the Apostle says 'remember' and in the next verse reiterates the thought. There are some things we are called to forget, for example injuries of others towards us. But one thing we must never forget is what we were and would be before God's love reached down and found us.

Let me post three aspects of the gospel which we find in this passage, and how they can point the way forward in our relationships:

### **He is our peace—v.14**

Is Paul calling to mind the words of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 57:19? In its original context, Isaiah is expressing God's offer of peace to all Jews, whether in dispersion or in Palestine

near Jerusalem. The words 'near' and 'far' came to represent Jews who were near to God and Gentiles who were far from him.

- the age-long barrier was removed
- there were actual walls in the temple
- we could argue how right it was to have walls of protection.

Peace is mentioned in three senses in the passage. Jesus is peace—v.14; makes peace—v.15; and preaches peace—v.17.

- previously the centuries-old divisions of religious practice, dress, diet and laws were acceptable, but now no longer so.

An old sign stood on the wall which led to the Jewish gates—'Any man (and it was only men) of another race entering these courts will only have himself to blame that his death follows.' What peace floods into our lives to know God has dealt his final judgement on such division? That sign fell off when the temple was destroyed in AD70, but it had become null and void thirty-five years earlier when One died on a cross.

Armitage Robinson said about the sign in the years it remained on display before the fall of the temple: 'It still stood; but it was already antiquated, obsolete, out of date, so far as its spiritual meaning went. The sign still stood; but the thing it signified was broken down.'

Peace is more than a doctrine or a philosophy—it is a Person!

### **One body through the cross—v.v. 15 and 16**

Paul speaks of a new humanity in two ways:

v.15—Christ created one new humanity in himself.

v.16—'One body through the cross'.

Both these concepts are revolutionary in application. Let me for a moment consider South Africa, for it is helpful in application. Our Johannesburg Central Mission is an outstanding story of evangelism and social action. It is located near the old Small Street Shopping Complex and the City Law Courts. It was well known as the first ever multi-racial eating house in Joburg—which was totally unacceptable at first, in any context in North America, South Africa, Australia and the United Kingdom.

- inner-estrangement and hostility is powerful
- this requires a profound personal change
- the 'new humanity' in Christ creates that possibility.

The cross is our only means of reconciliation and redemption. We are brought near to each other, and to God. Paul is not suggesting 'our hostility' to God, but also to each other.

- to reconcile is a uniquely Pauline verb that involves restoration into an original unity—1:10
- Gentiles had been alienated and are given priority, even though the gospel went first to Jews—Romans 1:16
- there are now no longer two humanities, but one.

We can no longer fence people out because they don't look like us, act our way or believe our doctrines. The cross becomes the means of an open door. This new humanity does more than span the Jewish/Gentile divide; it does away with gender and social distinctions.

Human differentiations remain, but inequality before God is abolished.

- Jesus broke down the wall
- Jesus created a single new humanity.

Here there is a negative and a positive description of what he was doing—Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28. ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’

### **Access by one spirit to the father—v.18**

Sometimes the analysis of the original word can be helpful—‘access’ is a technical but powerful word which is the right of free approach into the presence of a king. For some people, protocols are very difficult.

The image is beautiful and the truth clear: through Christ, we have open access to the Father. On the cross, Jesus flung open the door—in fact, nailed it open so that it could never be closed again—the door into the presence of God.

- a lovely Trinitarian picture is shown here—again not as doctrine, but practice.

In the corridor of access into God’s presence are all the world’s rejected types who by faith in Christ are able to claim his presence. In verses 19–22, we have what John Stott calls ‘a portrait of God’s new society or what we have become’.

- no longer foreigners and aliens
- fellow citizens with God’s people
- Jesus Christ, the cornerstone.

I have travelled far and wide and have come to value ‘a passport’ and its importance. I now have two passports—an Australian passport and a British/European one. When you lead parties abroad you constantly ask your group, ‘Has everyone got their passport?’ Quaint and powerful words are found inside the passport: ‘to pass freely without let or hindrance’. You and I have such a passport into the presence of God.

Bishop Lesslie Newbiggin writes in *A South Indian Diary of Sundaram*, the pastor of a village church in his diocese. A colourful figure, this pastor sported a military moustache, wore huge army boots, a faded battledress, a toupee, and always carried a long stainless steel baton. Sundaram had been in Burma when war broke out, and was unable to escape to India. He stayed on in Burma doing evangelistic work. He was arrested as a spy, taken to a Japanese guardhouse, and bound to a post. All his belongings, including his Bible, were confiscated.

A Japanese officer came in and began idly turning over Sundaram’s scanty possessions. He came to the Bible and looked across enquiringly. He could not speak Tamil and Sundaram could not speak Japanese. He made the sign of the cross in the palm of his hand.

Sundaram nodded. Then the officer crossed the room, stood in front of Sundaram, and stretched out his arms in the figure of the cross. Cutting the prisoner’s bonds, he signalled to him to go free. Before Sundaram went, he handed him apparently as a souvenir, the stainless steel baton which was his officer’s staff.

Across the gulf of warfare and language there stretched the healing, reconciling cross of Christ. Two men were at peace with one another through faith in him who made peace by the

blood of his cross. 'Beloved,' says John the Apostle, 'if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.'

Access to God is a concept of great weight and dignity. We must never resign ourselves to the scandal of separation. As one Christian leader put it, 'Whenever I see a wall between Christians, I try to pull out a brick.'