

Proper 16 B Ephesians 2:11-22

Our Christian church has grown out of Jewish roots in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Today's epistle reading deals with what was clearly the most significant controversy faced by the early church in the first few decades of its existence: should Gentiles enter the church and be admitted to full status with Jews? And which Jewish customs should be honoured, which dismissed in the new society of the church? There were no foregone conclusions here!

The controversy itself was fascinating: a long, complicated history of conversation, debate, argument back and forth, attempts at reconciliation, attempts at compromise. For example, we read in Philippians Paul's somewhat bitter comments about those who insisted on circumcision for admission into the Christian church. And in Acts 15 we read of the Apostolic Council, in which Christians gathered together and considered the matter. Peter, Paul, Barnabas and others reached a compromise: circumcision was not to be required, but Christians were to 'abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity.'

In today's lesson, Paul views this struggle in retrospect and interprets it theologically. He is not interested in the details of the Jewish-Christian reconciliation; rather, he looks back on the big picture and presents the whole completed process of reconciliation as a grand example of what the Church can be and should be.

He reminds his Gentile readers of their situation before Christ: they were 'separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise [i.e., of the Old Testament, which mostly excluded the Gentiles], having no hope and without God in the world.' In other words, they were disenfranchised and out in the cold.

They were also excluded by the 'dividing wall between Christians and Jews.' We are reminded of the dividing walls of the Jerusalem Temple, which excluded various groups of people. If we look at a diagram of Herod's Temple [20 BC to 70 AD], there are walls which define a court for the Gentiles, a separate court for Israelite women, one for Israelite laymen, another for priests, and yet another, the Holy of Holies, which only the High Priest could enter, and he only once a year, after special preparation.

And before Christ, his readers were condemned by the Mosaic Law which, regrettably, had become a symbol for separation of Jews and Gentile, a kind of 'iron curtain' separating Jew and Gentile. All in all, we see here a repeated theme of separation, exclusion, alienation, condemnation

The writer then goes on to contrast his readers' present experience in Christ Jesus. Things have fundamentally changed: walls have been broken down by Christ; those from far off have been brought near; there is now peace. We are no longer separated, excluded — we are no longer strangers and sojourners, but instead fellow citizens in God's city, members of the household or family of God [the household included all: parents, children and slaves]. We are no longer condemned — instead, we are reconciled, brought home, accepted. We belong in an intimate family circle. And we are also built into a new, living temple or dwelling place of God — a

building built on the foundation of apostles and martyrs, with Christ himself the cornerstone guiding the direction and the angle of the whole building. We are 'built into' this living temple.

This is powerful imagery indeed: but what does today's epistle reading say to us NOW? Do we really experience ourselves as beloved members of Christ's family? As living members of God's temple?

I am not entirely sure of the full meaning of Paul's words for us in the 21st century. At the very least, perhaps, they should remind us that the early church was frequently embroiled in controversy — in contrast to the view that the good old days were a golden age when almost everyone agreed on important matters!

I think that it is worth noting too that the grand reconciliation envisioned in this reading was and is Christ's action, not ours: 'You were brought near . . .' Not to deny or downplay the need to wrestle with the problems of the day — discussion, debate, at times argument is a healthy, necessary part of the life of anyone, including any Christian, who cares. But at times we need to be reminded not to take ourselves too seriously — in the big picture, in the final analysis, God is in charge.

In today's lesson, Paul presents a grand vision of what the Church can be and should be. It is the temple of God and it is the family of God. To me, this means that we as Church must aim to include people, not exclude them. In Paul's vision, Jew and Gentile are fused into one new humanity in which ethnic and racial distinctions, sexual and social distinctions are obliterated. As Paul writes in Galatians 3: 26–27: 'In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. . . . there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Do we consistently include; or do we, at times perhaps unconsciously, exclude those who may make us uncomfortable?

In this vision of Church, finally, I think that we ALL have a role to play. Do we yet realize this vision? Do we all, laity and clergy, take our full share of responsibility, of decision-making in church affairs? Or do we over-emphasize and contrast priestly and lay status, expecting the clergy to make the real decisions and the rest of us to just go along? Paul's vision of Church as living building and as God's family implies a joyful collaboration among ALL members, clergy and lay, young and old, male and female, with each group having an authentic, fully respected voice in decisions .

In the words of today's collect, Christ 'has opened for us a new and living way into [God's] presence.' May God bless us as we explore our role in the 21st C Body of Christ.

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