

I'd like to ask you a simple question, for you to think about. What is the gospel, the good news that we are supposed to share with others? It's a good exercise to sit down and think about how you would tell someone what Christians believe.

Perhaps you would use a verse like John 3.16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Or perhaps you would use one of the verses read last week, Ephesians 2.4-5:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

For that really is good news. God freely gives us the gift of life. We don't earn it, we don't deserve it, but God gives life to all those who believe and trust in his Son, Jesus.

But the good news doesn't end there. For God does not only reconcile us to himself, he also reconciles us to each other. To illustrate this Paul uses the example of Jews and Gentiles.

## **Jews and Gentiles**

‘Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth’—that includes most, if not all, of us—‘remember that at that time you were’ (v.12): (1) separate from Christ, (2) excluded from citizenship in Israel, (3) foreigners to the covenant of promise, (4) without hope, (5) without God.

That is not a good situation. We may as well be dead—in fact, Paul says in verse 1, without Jesus we *are* dead in our sins and transgressions. Without Jesus we have no hope of drawing near to God.

As an example, I would like to describe what the Temple in Jerusalem was like in Jesus' day. You had the Temple itself in the middle. This was the focus of God's presence with his people. Then you had the 'Court of the Priests', followed by the 'Court of the Israelites' (for men only). Then came the 'Court of the women'. These three courts and the Temple were

on the same level, surrounded by a wall. Down some steps was a large open area, surrounded by another wall. Down some more steps was the 'Court of the Gentiles'. The Temple was raised, so Gentiles could see it from their court, but they were not allowed through the dividing walls. All over the walls were signs in Greek and Latin saying not, 'trespassers will be prosecuted' but, 'trespassers will be executed.'

The design of the Temple mount announced that the Gentiles had no hope of drawing close to God.

But actually, the Jews were not much better off. They were separated from the Gentiles by a huge wall, but within the Temple itself they were separated from God by a huge curtain. Inside the Temple was a very special room: the Holy of Holies. This was where the ark of the covenant was kept, and it was the focus of God's presence with his people.

Between that at the 'Court of the Priests' there was a whacking great curtain. Even the High Priest was only allowed through the curtain once a year, on the day of atonement, when he confessed the sins of Israel, and made sacrifices of atonement. And presumably dusted the ark! Even Jews were separated from God: 'Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin' (Ro. 2.9).

## **But Now**

That is why two of the sweetest words in the Bible are ‘but now’. I don’t know if you learn Bible verses by heart, but it’s one of the most important things Christians can do.

Ephesians 2.13 is one of those verses we should all learn:

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

Jesus’ death is not some random piece of history that has no bearing on our life today. On the cross, through the shedding of his blood, Jesus defeated the powers of evil and death, he took the penalty for *our* sin, paid *our* ransom, delivered *us* from slavery, died in *our* place, for *our* sin, to give us *his* life.

The victory was won by Jesus once, in history, and he gives the benefits to us now, if we believe and trust in him.

It’s a bit like this. Did any of you watch the Olympics? When the gold medallists won their races, they had to wait a bit for the medal ceremony before they got their medal. Then they came home, had an opened-top bus parade around London, TV interviews, and now lots of extra sponsorship. They won the victory, but it was only later that they enjoyed the benefits.

Well this is a bit like that. Except, we didn't win the victory, Jesus did. We didn't earn the benefits of Jesus' death, he gives them to us freely, as a gift. *He won the gold medal then, we get the divine sponsorship deal now!*

Ephesians 2.13 says we have '*been brought near*'. It's something God does to us, not something we achieve by our own efforts. We have '*been brought near through the blood of Christ*'. In Christ we are brought near to God. But as I said, the good news doesn't end there. God gives far more than all we could ask or imagine. In Christ we are brought near to each other.

## **The New Humanity**

We often say, don't we: 'Jesus died to save us from our sins'. And that is true. The first half of Ephesians 2 tells us that. But he also died to unite us to one another:

[Jesus'] purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. (2.15b)

Paul says that Jesus' purpose was not simply to give life to us who were dead in our sins. Jesus' purpose was to make a new humanity in his image. The Gentiles were far off, the Jews not

much closer; so God created something new, a new people whom he reconciled to himself and to each other. The new people are not called Gentiles or Jews, but Christians. The people is not a nation like Israel, it is the Church. That is, all the Christians who have ever lived, who are alive now, and who are yet to be born.

I find this quite amazing, actually. People often criticise ‘The Church’. Some people like to think they can be Christians and not really belong to a church.

But—this is the thing I find amazing—Paul tells us that Jesus did not die for you and me as isolated individuals. He died for us as members of this new humanity. **Jesus did not simply die for you and me, he died for the Church.**

Verse 16 tells us this:

[Jesus’] purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and *in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross*, by which he put to death their hostility. (2.15-16)

Jesus did not reconcile us to God as isolated individuals, but as individual members of a new humanity: the Church. [Rpt]

Paul goes on:

For through [Jesus] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. (2.18)

You remember how the Gentiles, and even the Jews did not have direct access to God? Well the Church does, through Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Coming to church, being a member of the body of Christ, is not an optional extra. It is a fundamental part of what it means to be a Christian. It is a fundamental part of God's purposes in Jesus. It is a fundamental part of the good news.

How committed are you to your Christian brothers and sisters? I'm sure you smile kindly to them on a Sunday morning. But do you think about them, pray about them, every other day? Do you do your best to get to know them, to get to them *really well*? I know that this is something I struggle with, especially as we are working across three churches.

But the rest of Ephesians is basically Paul expanding on this theme of unity. It should be the hallmark of the Church. We are no longer foreigners to God. That is one of the best things about the Church. No matter where you are in the world, you are 'members of God's household' (2.19), you have a family.

## The Living Temple

Finally, Paul describes the church as a temple. The old Temple was built with human hands, stone upon stone. But the new one is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Paul here doesn't mean the Old Testament prophets, but those who worked with the apostles, like Paul and Peter, to get the Church going, to spread the gospel, to build it up.

But that foundation is not simply historical—the people who actually started the church—it is still an authority for us today, because of the New Testament, the witness of those apostles and prophets who are the foundation of the Church. We must be faithful to their teaching if we are to be truly the Church.

And, we must be faithful to Jesus Christ himself, the 'chief cornerstone' of the Church (2.20). He is the one who died to give each of us life, to reconcile us to God, and he is the one who died to unite us and give life to the Church. 'In him', Paul says, 'the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord' (2.21).

He joins us together, but it isn't static, it's dynamic. It's a bit like this church building at the moment, actually. It is being restored for God's glory. It isn't a static building, it's changing

and growing for God's glory. So we should not be content to stay the same. We should always be striving for more, as Jesus holds us together and transforms us in his image. It's a wonderful image of unity and growth, on the foundation of what Jesus has done for us, as he works among us now.

You see, Jesus died, but God is not dead. He is alive—and where does he live? Of course, he is in heaven, sitting on his throne, guiding history; but where does he dwell on earth? For Israel his presence was focused on the Holy of Holies, in the Temple. For us, his presence is still focused in the Temple. But the Temple is no longer a building: it's us.

Paul saves the best bit until last:

And in Jesus you are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (2.22)

The Church is not empty. We Christians are not an empty shell. God lives in us and among us by his Spirit. His Spirit is the dynamo, the engine that drives the Church forward. Just as Jesus is not dead, but alive, so the Church is not dead, it is alive. Our rebuilding works are evidence of that. This church is not dead, it is alive, and it is on the move.

Do you find that encouraging? I do! God is among us, working and driving us forward, building us together in Jesus. He is the reason all this is possible. Without him, none of this is possible.

I began by asking you what you think the good news is. In this passage Paul tells us about two aspects of it:

1. God makes us alive, even though we were dead in our sins. Jesus died to reconcile us to God.

2. God creates a new humanity which is united and at peace with itself. Jesus died to reconcile us to each other.

(And I'd want to add a third: Jesus died to reconcile us to creation. But Paul doesn't say that in this passage!)

So when we share the good news, we are not simply inviting people to repent of their sin, we are also inviting them to join God's new humanity, the Church. We are inviting them to become members of God's worldwide family, his household.

So, let us all of us commit to serving one another in love, just as we serve God. Let us live in peace with one another, seeking

to build each other up, as Jesus builds us together and dwells among us by his Spirit.

I love Ephesians 2. I think it is at the heart of Paul's theology. If you can, do read through it this week a few times. Dwell on what Paul is saying, and pray that God would do as he has promised, and dwell among us, building us up and uniting us.