

Sermon Ephesians 2:11-21 Mark Ashcroft

William Temple Wythenshawe 19th July 2015

It's a great honour to be with you and share in your 50th Anniversary celebrations this year.

My Maths teacher used to say two into one won't go – I can't quite remember what we were supposed to do next – be that as it may, our passage from Ephesians today is one of those instances where God does what is seemingly impossible. He makes two go into one.

The passage is about reconciliation which is at the very heart of the Gospel. Reconciliation with God and in this passage between Jew and gentile

In this beautiful passage, as elsewhere in his writing, Paul uses powerful language to describe the Gospel at work. In the passage before, he had been telling Jewish Christians "Once you were dead in your sin but now in Christ God has made you alive". It's a beautiful image of God taking us from death to resurrection.

In this passage, Paul is turning his attention to Gentiles – those who are not Jews. And he says verse 13 "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" Once they had been strangers, aliens in a foreign land a million miles away from God and the hope of salvation. They might as well have been on Pluto, but now Paul says you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ shed for us on the Cross and in union with Christ through faith and baptism. We have been brought near not by what we have done but what God has done FOR us on the cross and IN us through the gift of faith and baptism

I don't know if this speaks to you, but what Paul says resonates with my own faith journey. I grew up in a church going family, even on holidays going to church for fear of the vicar coming round to give us pastoral care at an awkward time! But I felt God was a million miles away – sitting up in heaven pretty much irrelevant to my daily life. But then God spoke into my life, I heard his voice, experienced his love, felt his presence, and suddenly I was brought near and I fell in love with God

God draws near to us, and he draws us near as forgiven sinners cleansed by the blood of Christ and we come into his presence and into his family.

Paul's point is that God does more than just individual salvation – for he draws both Jew and gentile into the same family. In those days there was misunderstanding and hostility between Jew and gentile; both thought the other was godless. The Jews saw the Gentiles as unclean and worshipping the wrong gods as idols; Gentiles thought Jews weird and irreligious – they didn't even bother to make a statue of their God!

Symbolising this hostility there was a dividing wall around the Temple precinct. And on the wall were notices apparently telling Gentiles not to cross the wall on the pain of death. So Paul says here ¹⁴ "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us". And he goes on to talk about the reconciliation that Jesus Christ has achieved between Jew and gentile – "so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two".

What they had in common, the death of Christ the gift of the Spirit, access to the presence of God was far more significant than their differences be it of culture language or heritage.

But Paul is saying something more; he is saying that as Jew and gentile reconcile and both take their place in the church, together they become a dwelling place for God. Or putting it negatively – if they don't accept one another they won't experience God's blessing and presence. The proof of the pudding of the Gospel of reconciliation is seen in our ability to be reconciled with one another.

I happen to have a copy of a book by William Temple written when he was Bishop of Manchester. It is called *Christus Veritas* (Christ the Truth) and it was given to my Grandfather by my Granny in 1949. I think in those days of rationing it was tricky to find a good Christmas present! It's nice to have as they have both written in it.

In the book Temple writes of the importance of our ability to reconcile (CV p 265)

“How can the Father take into affectionate intimacy with Himself two children who refuse to be on friendly terms with one another? He can only forgive us as we forgive one another.

The forgiveness of sins, as an article of the creed, is the supreme test of practical Christianity. ...To love those who love us is beautiful and pleasant, but it is also easy; to love those who hate and injure us is very difficult and may be painful but it is glorious. This is the supreme manifestation of the life of God in Humanity. Christ exhibited it in the Passion, and he calls us to a like heroic love. We are to be perfect in the way that our Heavenly Father is perfect; but his perfection is declared to consist in the indiscriminate love which He offers to friend and foe alike.....”

That sense of mutual reconciliation explains the liturgical importance of The Peace – often introduced by words from Ephesians 2. He is our peace. It’s an opportunity to reconcile with one another before we go on to receive Communion together.

So as we reflect on this passage from Ephesians 2 what does it have to say to us in our 50th Anniversary?

Well, maybe there are some church members in Wythenshawe who maybe fell out with someone here or fallen out with the church in general for some reason and need to be invited and welcomed back to church.

On a personal level maybe there is someone that you have fallen out with whether in church or outside it and you need to offer reconciliation. I remember the joy and release when I wrote to someone I had fallen out with and felt resentful towards but then found it in my heart to forgive and even to appreciate all that they had done for me, the renewed relationship was sweet.

So perhaps as we share the Eucharist we can look to God to prompt us with the names of people to whom we can offer | God’s gift of reconciliation and peace. Because in God’s economy, two into one does go!