

# **He is our peace**

## **Sermon 21 July 2024 – Holmbury St. Mary**

Readings: Ephesians 2: 8 – 22 Mark 6: 30 – 34; 53 – 56

### *Opening Prayer*

### *Introduction*

Why are there wars? Why so much conflict between human beings, and even within the Church? What is God up to, if he is actually there?

I can't answer that question, but our passage from Ephesians tells us that God has a plan to put it all right. The first three chapters of Ephesians tell us again and again in various different ways that God has an endgame. He is working his purpose out. Paul also tells us that we all have parts to play in God's cosmic strategy.

Everything revolves around Jesus Christ. In chapter 1 Paul says that God's plan is to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. "God has seated Christ at his right hand, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion ... and appointed him to be head over everything".

But the Church is also important. God doesn't want Christ to end up ruling in perfect order, with everything and everyone in abject subjugation under him. God has always wanted a family of people who love him, who freely choose his way and enjoy fellowship with him. And that is what Ephesians 2 is about. Through Christ we are being built into a holy temple, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Paul says that Christ has brought about a huge change in our lives. We used to be separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship, without hope and without God. But in Christ, and through his death on the cross, we who were once far away have been brought near. Christ himself is our peace.

There are two kinds of peace needed, two reconciliations required.

- Firstly a horizontal reconciliation, between people.
- Secondly a vertical reconciliation between people and God.

### *Horizontal Reconciliation*

My wife Debbie and I lived for more than 20 years in India, where we had no citizenship. Most of the time there was no issue with this, but every now and then it caused some discomfort. We needed visas to enter India and these could be refused or revoked. We had to pay a lot more than Indian citizens to enter various museums and heritage sites. We had to ask permission from the police to leave the country

(you would have thought that they would be only too happy to be rid of us!). Coupled with our distinct skin colour, and deep-rooted cultural differences, we were always going to be outsiders. This has made us more sensitive, I hope, to how people from other nations feel when they try to make their homes in the UK.

For Jews there were only two types of people in the world: Jews ... and everyone else, the Gentiles. As far as the Jews were concerned, they were the insiders. The Gentiles were outsiders – excluded from the circle of God's covenant promises. Without hope and without God. There was hostility between Jew and Gentile.

But now, Paul says, **Jesus Christ has declared peace**. Those who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. He himself is our peace.

He has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. Paul may be referring to the Temple wall that divided the Court of the Gentiles from the temple proper. Gentiles were not allowed to enter any further. But I think it's more likely he is referring to all the accumulated rules and regulations that were designed to keep God's people separate. Jesus said that he didn't come to abolish the Law of Moses, but he did destroy its power to exclude people from God's presence and mercy.

Christ's purpose was to create one new humanity. This is no temporary ceasefire or grudging acceptance of each other. Our little Tillingbourne River eventually merges with the river Wey at Guildford, and the two become one. The water from each will become thoroughly mixed. Thereafter it is impossible to tell which water has come from Leith Hill, and which from Hampshire. Equally, in the new humanity, there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. And this horizontal reconciliation applies to all factions of the human race. No one is excluded. Everyone is welcome.

### *Vertical Reconciliation*

He himself is our Peace, He has broken down the walls of hostility between peoples and between individuals. But that is not enough.

Paul says, *“Christ's 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. 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.*

This is all about **vertical reconciliation**. Jews and Gentiles were far apart and hostile to each other, but that was nothing to the separation between people and God. Earlier Paul says that all of us, Jews and Gentiles alike, were, by nature, enemies of God and objects of his wrath. But because of his great love for us, God has made us alive in Christ. And this is all by Grace, the free gift of God. There is nothing that we have done, or could have done to heal our relationship with God.

Now, both Jews and Gentiles have been brought together into God's family. Paul moves seamlessly from the metaphor of God's family to a building. We are members of God's house, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. And it is not just any building, it is a holy temple in the Lord.

The temple was central to the Jewish faith. God had promised to live there, and so it was the place where God and people could come together. It was designed to be heaven on earth. But the physical temple had been destroyed once and was destined to be destroyed again by the Romans, a few years after Paul was writing. God's plan all along had been to create a temple of living stones in which he could live. This new temple could never be destroyed and would truly be heaven on earth. We are all part of that holy temple in the Lord.

### *Conclusion and Application*

We have seen that God's eternal cosmic plan has been accomplished through Christ. Jesus has proclaimed peace. Peace between people. Peace with God. Horizontal reconciliation and Vertical reconciliation. Together with people of every race and nation we are being built into a holy temple in the Lord.

The second half of Ephesians spells out some of the implications of this for disciples of Christ. We are to live a life worthy of this amazing calling, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. We are to live as children of light.

But let me draw out two thoughts for us to take home today.

Firstly, peacemaking. Jesus is the great peacemaker, and we are called to imitate him. Where is there conflict or hostility around us? Are we in any way responsible for this? What can we do to promote and enable peace between people? How can we help people to find peace with each other, and peace with God?

Secondly, unity in the body. Tom Wright makes the interesting point that the new temple is built from stones that come from two different quarries. Yet Christ is able to combine them into a beautiful dwelling fit for God to live in. We are not all supposed to be the same, we don't lose our identities and become uniform bricks. But we are called to hold on to each other, despite our differences, and to keep Christ as the Chief Cornerstone.

### *Closing prayer*

Lord Jesus, thank you for declaring Peace, and uniting us all as one family through your death on the cross. Amen