

Sermon - Ephesians 2: alive together in Christ

The focus on unity, regardless ...

- Last Sunday we started a sermon series covering the entire letter to the Ephesians, looking at chapter one.
- I made some general statements about the letter as a whole, picking up on the argument by a number of Christian scholars that it perhaps wasn't written by Paul himself, but rather by someone else in Paul's name.
- I expressed my own opinion that it was thus probably not written by Paul.
- However, I need to make a subtle but important clarification to that.
- While the majority of scholars think that, there is a minority that thinks it was indeed written by Paul himself - including the New Testament scholar NT Wright, whose own translation I quoted for chapter one.
- So I need to modify my expressed opinion, by saying that, as we cannot definitively prove either theory to be correct, it would be more helpful to leave the two views open for your own preference.
- Regardless of which position you prefer, the letter to the Ephesians was discerned by the early church as inspired by God, and was thus deemed to be Holy Scripture.
- And God continues to speak to the Church today through this letter, and I think that God has a message for our own faith community too, at this time, through this sacred text.
- The complete letter is a treatise on unity within the Church - unity between individual members and unity between groups - found in our common relationship in Christ.
- It is this reassurance of unity that we would benefit from affirming and acting on in our Church today.

Predestination: focus on inclusion, not exclusion

- There is another aspect from chapter one that I didn't refer to at all, and which it would be helpful to unpack briefly.
- Verses 4 and 5 make the following statements about predestination:
... just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ ... (vv 4,5)
- And verses 11 and 12 reiterate the concept of predestination:
In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined ... so that we ... might live for the praise of his glory. (vv 11,12)
- So there is the idea that God chose us - that is, predestined us - to be adopted as God's children, through Christ, and that we have been predestined to participate in heaven, in God's kingdom.
- Over the centuries, some theologians have logically arrived at some unhappy conclusions based on these statements.
- The logic can be summarised as follows:
 - If God chose us - that is, predestined us - to be included in heaven, then logically God predestined other people to be excluded, and end up in hell.
 - Thus, by this logic, everyone's fate is already determined by God before they are born.
- My objection to this is that Jesus made it clear that God's forgiveness is offered to the whole world - without exception, without reservation - even though not everyone embraces the forgiveness offered to them.
- Likewise, God chooses or destines everyone to be adopted as his children and to receive the inheritance of his kingdom, but not everyone embraces this.
- However, the letter to the Ephesians was not written to those who don't embrace being adopted as God's children - this letter is not about them.
- Rather, the author is focused on assuring the recipients of the letter - including us - that God has already planned to include them.

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- Predestinationists unnecessarily focus on those who they presume to be excluded, whereas the writer of Ephesians is focusing on those who are included.
- And is emphasising that they are *fully* included along with God's chosen people, to receive the same inheritance.
- When it comes to God's Word, if we focus on who we might imagine to be excluded from God's kingdom then we are missing the whole point.
- Rather, we should be focused on reassuring those who are included.

Death and life

- Let us now look directly at the text of chapter two.
- The first three verses read:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

(Ephesians 2.1-3)

- There is a basic concept here, highlighted in the words: 'trespasses', 'sins', 'passions of our flesh', 'children of wrath'.
- This is in contrast with God's way, which is the way of life.
- God's way not only leads to life in all its fullness, but the way itself is also life nurturing.
- If God is the source of all life, then God's way participates in that.
- When we trespass against God, then we are following our own way.
- Through following our worldly desires, we sin - we do things that damage and destroy our relationship with God, and with others.
- We react to our fears and anxieties, and hit out at others.
- Since we are thus excluding ourselves from God's way of life, we are metaphorically dead.

- But we are given a wonderful reassurance in the next verses:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2.4-7)

- So, because we have chosen to be baptised into Christ's death, we find ourselves caught up in Christ's resurrection - we are made metaphorically alive.
- All the life-draining effect of our sin is overcome and removed, and we find ourselves participating in the life-giving faith relationship with God, made possible in and through Christ.
- This has been achieved not through our own actions, but through God's undeserved favour, that is, through his grace, as the next verses state:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

(Ephesians 2.8-10)

- God's way of life is lived through good works.
- We don't achieve it through good works, but we celebrate it through good works.

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Our unity, in Christ

- The next point that is made distinguishes between the Gentile believers and the Jewish believers.
- The Gentiles - the 'uncircumcised' - were excluded from God's people, named Israel, and from the covenant that God had with them, which was physically marked through circumcision.
- Verses 11 and 12 state:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' ... remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2.11-12)
- And then goes on to reassure us that this separation of the two groups has been demolished by Christ:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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. (Ephesians 2.13-14)
- How has Christ achieved this? The next couple of verses explain:

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Ephesians 2.15-16)
- What is worth noting here is that Christ does not reconcile the two groups - the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers - to each other.
- Rather, he reconciles them both to God, through his action of sacrificial love.
- When people follow God's way of life, and participate in Christ's action of sacrificial love, then the divisions between people are dismantled, and they become united in the body of Christ.
- We acknowledge and proclaim this ourselves in the liturgy of the Eucharist, when we say the words:

*We who are many are one body,
for we all share in the one bread.*
- The actions of Christ and their consequences are clarified further in the next couple of verses:

*So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;
for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2.17-18)*
- There is a vital message of unity here for any group of Christians who feel the need to exclude another group of Christians: that everyone in Christ is part of the new humanity in Christ, with access to the Father through the one Spirit - that is, you cannot exclude what God has included through Christ.
- This should also be a reassurance for any group of Christians who feel excluded by another group - they cannot exclude you from God's gracious inclusion through Christ.

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Growing into a holy temple

- The final verses of chapter two reaffirm this unity with the image that we are all built together into a holy temple, founded on Christ:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God. (Ephesians 2.19-22)

- This echoes the image that St Peter gives in his first letter:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,

a cornerstone chosen and precious;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' (1 Peter 2.4-6)

So may you be reassured that you are included by God into fullness of life.

May you recognise that no-one can exclude anyone from God's Kingdom, when they have been reconciled to God in Christ.

And may you participate - as a living stone, joined together with every other believer - in growing into a holy temple, the dwelling place for our God.