

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday Morning 21 July, 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity.

*Texts: Jeremiah 23.1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2.11-22; Mark 6.3-34; 53-56.*

## **Breaking down the dividing wall**

During my life I have seen one major wall in dividing a country come down and three go up. I remember the profound joy and hope when the Berlin Wall came down in November 1997. But I also remember, with the sadness, the wall dividing the island of Cyprus coming into effect following the Turkish invasion in 1974, as well as the erection of the 708 km Israel West Bank Barrier and the terrible impact. More recently, we've also seen the development of part of the so-called 'Trump' wall between the USA and Mexico.

Walls are, in a way, an outward and uncompromising symbol of the disagreements which so often arise between human beings. A wall is what we get when our fears, suspicions and dislike of others becomes so strong that only a hard, uncompromising barrier can reassure us. The paradox is, however, that rather than making us safer, the wall becomes a breeding ground of further prejudice, alienation and hatred.

And we were not made for this. Walls built for reasons of fear and hatred are not signs of us living life in all its fullness in the image of God but rather a cruel inversion of this. The tragedy is that we often justify erecting walls whether they be physical or social ones on the basis of the myths and prejudices and fears we've either inherited or developed rather than trying to make a leap of imagination and faith to reconciliation with those we fear and dislike.

But Christ shows us another way, calling those who claim to bear his name to break down these barriers, seeking something life-giving with our opponents. So today I want to explore with you what this might look like and how we can take the first steps to help make this a reality.

Jesus, of course, was no stranger to facing walls of hostility and fear, rooted on difference. As we read the gospels, we see just how widespread these were including the division between the Roman occupying elite and the occupied communities of Judea and Galilee; between Gentile and Jew; between Jew and Samaritan. But there were also a number of other 'walls' or barriers in existence, for example, between rich and poor; between religious leaders and the people they were supposed to lead; between those considered pure and holy and those seen as sinful or unworthy of respect because of their low status.

Earlier this summer, Glen and I ran the '*The Difference*' course here at Holy Trinity. Designed to help us develop reconciliation and peace-building skills, *the Difference course* is rooted on what we learn from the Bible about how Jesus tackled the walls which he faced in his own life and ministry – those walls which were ultimately to lead to his death.

We found, through studying the course, that there were three main ways in which Jesus helped overcome differences and barriers which, on the surface, appeared insurmountable.

First of all, he showed curiosity in those he encountered who were different from him. Not curiosity in the 'fancy that' way as a tourist when we come across someone from another culture or country wearing an exotic headdress or practising some exotic ritual and we rush to take a photo, even though we haven't the slightest idea why they are wearing it or doing this (and often, sadly, we often show no desire to know).

In contrast, Jesus was deeply interested in those he encountered, valuing them as fellow human beings made in the image of God, meeting them where they were and seeking to explore with them, what mattered to them and what they were seeking.

Second, Jesus was present with those he met – not just in the sense of physical presence but focused on the person before him, and being willing to listen and put himself in their shoes, imagining and learning to glimpse what daily life was like for them. We see this dramatically in Jesus' meeting with the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years and the woman bent over and crippled at the temple.

And thirdly, Jesus helped them find a new way forward in their lives through reimagining the situation – seeing how things could be different and more life giving. Think, for example of Jesus calling the little tax collector, Zacchaeus down from the tree and helping to find a new purpose in life and a new dignity, based not on cheating and exploiting the weak, but showing generosity and practising restorative justice by giving back what he had wrongly taken.

Jesus incarnated these ways of overcoming difference and barriers of fear and hatred in his own life and this is why he is the model for us to follow. In doing so, he transformed the lives of many but also incurred the hatred and suspicion of those who had no desire to change the situation because it was personally advantageous to them or the group to which they belonged.

And this is how, paradoxically, as St Paul shows us in his letter to the Ephesians today, what appeared to be the utter failure of Jesus' death on the Cross, was in fact quite the opposite. For through being willing to live these ways of engaging with people, whoever they were, by being curious, being present with them and helping them reimagine the situation even when it led to his death, Jesus opened the door to help us relate to each other in an entirely new way.

St Paul gives us a graphic description of what Jesus has achieved, breaking down the wall that for centuries had divided Jew and Gentile and enabling them to find a new way forward together. The Gentiles, once strangers and aliens, are now welcome and accepted, whilst the deadweight pressure of the law has been lifted for the Jews. Both Jews and Gentiles were now free to reimagine a future, growing together as one community, rooted on Christ who is its cornerstone. It's a living, growing community with enormous potential. For if they can embrace and celebrate

their differences whilst recognising their common life in Christ, they can grow into a living temple of immense beauty and good in the world.

As we reflect on this transformative image, it's time now for us to reflect on what this means for us in our context today. At a national and international level, we can, quite understandably feel quite helpless and in despair as we look around the world and are confronted with so many, bitter, bloody and seemingly intractable conflicts. It's very hard to imagine any walls coming down soon, let alone the building up of communities rooted in mutual love.

Yet even in this situation, we make a difference in two main ways. First, by making a very conscious effort to inform ourselves about at least some of these conflicts so that we are not reliant on our prejudices and ignorance. We have particularly good opportunity to do this in Geneva and particularly at Holy Trinity with so many different nationalities represented including a number working for international organisations here, who are very well informed about the contexts and realities of life in a number of these conflict zones. So let us make an effort over the next few weeks and months to find out more – to be curious and to be present to each other in order to find out more about the contexts and reasons for these conflicts at first hand.

Then in our prayers, let's hold these situations before God, asking for grace so that we and all who are involved in these contexts may begin to take the first steps of building understanding. May we learn what it means to put oneself in the shoes of the other; of having the grace to imagine together how things might be different.

And within our communities and relationships at work, in our studies and here at church we can apply the same principles, consciously seeking to be curious, to be present and to reimagine with those with whom, we know at present, we feel a sense of walls and barriers dividing us. If we can take the first step, the initiative in this, it can feel deeply scary and challenging but we will worth it. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God".

We can also make a commitment, to seek wherever we can, to initiate healing and reconciliation where things have gone wrong in our relationships and the lives of those close to us. This evening's Eucharist with prayers and the laying-on of hands and anointing gives us one such opportunity but this is also something we can ask God to help us with in our prayers each day.

Whatever we do, even on a small-scale, can have an impact, like ripples stretching out when we throw a stone in a pond. And the world desperately needs it for we are torn apart, not just by physical wars and conflicts but also by even more frightening invisible forms of war. Commenting on the digital outage this week which has caused chaos through the world, Sir Nigel Shadbolt, one of the UK leading computer scientists pointed out that what we don't see is that

*'there is are 24/7 set offensive and defensive operations taking place between states every single day. The digital is invisible, pervasive, ubiquitous and it is difficult to pin down and make clear rules '.* He went on to say:

*'This is where our multilateral organisations need to be, to help us make settlements between nation states ... And that's at least one place we should start'.*

We can make a difference and if we consciously try to be agents of healing and reconciliation, then, with God's grace, change can happen. Churches can provide a particular focus of this and I'd like to end with a story to illustrate this.

It's a story from St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland where there is a door of reconciliation. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, there were two leading families, the Butlers and the Fitzgerald's who were in conflict because both wanted the coveted post of Lord Deputy. It resulted in war between them culminating in the Butler family seeking refuge in the Chapter House of the Cathedral. The Fitzgeralds wanted to come in a make peace but the Butlers refused, worried they would be massacred. So Gerard Fitzgerald, head of his family, as a gesture of reconciliation, ordered a hole to be made in the door and stretched his arm through. It was very high risk strategy as the Butlers might well have chopped it off. But recognising that he was risking his life by this gesture of friendship, the Butlers saw that he was serious, left the Cathedral and came out to make peace.

Hopefully we'll never be called upon to do anything quite so risky. But it's an image that perhaps we can hold onto to remind us that when we are courageous enough to reach out first for reconciliation when relationships have soured or broken down, remarkable change can be possible.

**Amen**

**The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green**