

Pentecost 7
19/7/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 7:1 – 14a
Psalm 89
Ephesians 2:11 - 22
Mark 6:30 – 34, 53 - 56

Sermon preached by Rev. Harry Kerr

Every Sunday maybe every day, we pray: *Your kingdom come, your will be done in earth as it is in heaven.* That is really the heart of our prayer and the heart of our longing. The question is *How and when does it happen?* I heard two sermons at two successive ecumenical carol services which went something like this: *Christmas is a beautiful time but look at all the awful things that are happening in the world and the awful things that are happening to people. But not to worry. When we die we will go and live with Jesus and be happy for ever.* That's a bit of a character but it is a fair summary of the message. That's one way of saying: *Your kingdom come.* However the writer of today's passage from the letter to the Ephesians saw it very differently. It may have been Paul it may have been one of his disciples. We don't know. It doesn't matter. The message is the same.

I visited Ephesus a few weeks ago so I'm interested in the setting and what was going on. Ephesus would have been a remarkable place. It was a big port. It was the centre of Roman Administration for the Southern part of what is now Turkey. It was centred on the famous Temple of the goddess Artemis or Diana, also a thriving business. St Paul had a famous run in with the silversmiths who sold statues of Diana as souvenirs. It had many beautiful buildings, a theatre, a beautiful library, a brothel, a communal loo. Many statues, a council chamber, a market and much more. There were many well to do citizens who were looked after by army of slaves. There was a small Jewish community, working very hard to preserve their distinctive way of life, even as they benefitted by what the city had to offer. When some of them were attracted by Paul's teaching and began to know Jesus they discovered that something very new and challenging, and a bit threatening was happening. Other people, citizens and slaves, wanted to be part of this new community. Soon they outnumbered the Jews. Who were they now? Had they joined up with the Jews or was something new and revolutionary going on? That is what Ephesians is all about. How to roadmap and live the new reality.

To talk about this new reality I want to be a bit personal. I grew up in Northern Ireland in a deeply divided society. Protestants and Roman Catholics grew up in parallel societies which had very little contact with each other. Each community had its own schools, its own social life, often its own workplaces its own streets. Each felt threatened by the other. It wasn't a bad place to grow up. I grew up in a liberal Christian home, went to a liberal Christian school, had good friends and generally a pretty good life.

It was a bit like living in a fortress without realising it unless you bumped into the surrounding wall. We knew we were different from them. The churches reinforced this. We were taught how we were different and of course superior. The result of all this was that I never knew any Roman Catholics until I went to University. Even then the Roman Catholics I met were English or people who had defied the Roman Catholic church's ban on that university. I was ordained and went to a parish in a deeply divided area of Belfast. After Vatican 2 things began to change. I became organising secretary of the Student Christian Movement. A few years before, a Protestant student in a predominantly Catholic University had started a branch of the Movement. Roman Catholics flocked to it. I found myself in a movement which was developing into an ecumenical Catholic/Protestant Christian Community. This was at the time when the Civil Rights movement was developing and the troubles were beginning. Now I was getting to know R.C.'s as friends and fellow Christians in a way I never had before as they discovered each other. We were talking together, doing things together, praying together. We were moving into a new reality, no longer primarily Catholic and Protestant but moving together into something new and exciting. This was a reality which changed me and changed all of us. We were in a different place to people who still lived in the fortress, We could never be the same again. We were becoming one at a time when divisions were becoming more bitter and violent. Much later the same sort of thing is happening as I become involved in interfaith dialogue.

In today's passage the writer celebrates the same thing happening to Jewish and Gentile Christians in Ephesus. He claims that this is actually what God has done and is doing in Jesus. *You who were once complete outsiders are now part of this new humanity that God has created.* The Jewish community of course was and is highly structured. There were strict rules about what you could eat, who you could mix with, who you could touch when you should wash and much more. The temple was designed to keep Gentiles right on the fringe behind one wall and women at a distance behind another. When I was in France a few weeks ago. I saw an old synagogue in which women were banished under the floor and listened through a hole! By his cross Jesus has swept all that away, broke down all those walls and any others we might build between ourselves and others. He is inviting us into his new creation. The passage says: *Christ set out to make peace — offering himself to us both equally, suffering on the cross for us both equally — so that in him we might find one shared basis for reconciliation with God. If that's not enough to eradicate the hostility between us, nothing will!* It's very difficult to break down barriers like the ones I described in Northern Ireland. It is still very much a work in progress. Now we know that peace is possible.

That is what God is doing when Jesus offers his life on the cross. That is how we will make peace: when we are willing to let go of many of the things which seem to matter most. Many of us will have discovered this when we engage with people of other cultures and other faiths. It's hard work but as we work away with it new things begin to happen and we find we are moving into a new place which changes us at the deepest level.

Unfortunately Union within the body of Christ is another matter. Since the establishment of the Uniting church the ecumenical movement seems to be in retreat. It is certainly not the cutting edge that some of us remember. All the churches seem to be becoming preoccupied with our own lives and our own structures, concentrating on our own survival. Deep divisions have opened up within each church: divisions over sexuality, over how we read the bible, over how we worship, over what songs we sing, over how we do mission and evangelism. We retreat into new fortresses. Our ecumenical councils seem to have become more just another level of church organisation.

Are we forgetting something important: the sting in the tail of this passage? *In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; [qvb://0/anchor/24](#)in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.* The Revised English Bible puts it even more pointedly: *In Christ you also are being built into a spiritual dwelling for God.* Not a good church, not a well organised church, not even a mission shaped church but a *spiritual dwelling for God.* The original temple was that. When it became an end in itself it lost the plot. The glory departed. When we become an end in ourselves the same thing happens. Maybe it is time to let go of many of the things which seem so fundamental to us and begin again to build a spiritual dwelling for the God who so loved the world that he gave his son.