

**Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon  
July 19th, 2009**

**Ephesians 3:11-22**

This week the National Assembly of the Uniting Church is meeting in Sydney. Over the past decade, as I attended Assemblies and began to prepare sermons, I came to the conclusion that it's more than coincidence that the Assembly meets every three years at the exact time that the three-year lectionary cycle takes us through the letter to the Ephesians. I don't know exactly what's been happening at the Assembly this year, but I do know that whatever happens and whatever issues are discussed the church needs the reminders that Ephesians gives us about its true nature.

The letter to the Ephesians isn't really a letter. It's not like the letters to the Corinthians, for example, which are directed to individual communities, and provide answers to the specific problems those communities are having. The letter to the Ephesians is more of a circular, a theological treatise, sent to all the churches in the Roman province of Asia. It tells them what the church truly is, and what the church truly is is pretty awesome. In the letter to the Ephesians the church isn't the local congregation; it's a universal phenomenon, which will ultimately include all of creation. In this letter the church is the body of Christ; with Christ as its only head. By being part of the church, Christians already share in Christ's resurrection; they have been made alive and raised up. All this is being said to small groups of Christians, weak and unimportant in contemporary Roman society, but through Christ and in Christ the children of God.

Today's reading talks about one element of what it means to be the church, the body of Christ. In Christ God reconciled the world to himself, through the cross there has been vertical reconciliation between God and humanity. Today's reading reminds us that through Christ there has also been horizontal reconciliation. Christ did not just bring peace between God and human beings; Christ has brought peace between different groups of humans. And this started with the two groups most profoundly separated in the Roman Empire: Jews and Gentiles.

I've talked before about the strength of the separation between Jews and Gentiles and the amazingly radical change that occurred in the early church, when Gentiles were welcomed into the community without needing to become Jewish, to be circumcised or obey dietary laws; when Jews began to associate with Gentiles, to share meals and worship with them. The division between Jews and Gentiles was the greatest division that the early church could imagine. It isn't too extreme to say that Jews and Gentiles saw themselves as enemies. Think of Hutus and Tutsis, Serbs and Croats, republicans and loyalists in Northern Ireland, the worst divisions between people that we have seen in recent decades - and that is the sort of separation that we are talking about here. In Christ that separation has been overcome. In his "I have a dream" speech, Martin Luther King talked about looking forward to a day when the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. In Christ that reconciliation has happened. All hostility has come to an end.

It has come to an end, the letter to the Ephesians tells us, not because Jews have become Gentiles or Gentiles have become Jews, but because both have become part of something new, a new humanity. In a small way we've experienced that in the Uniting Church. In 1977 Methodists did not become Presbyterians; Presbyterians did not become Congregationalists; Congregationalists did not become Methodists. Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists all become part of the new body, the Uniting Church. There was pain in leaving the past behind, but great joy in the new things that were born.

The peace that Christ brings is a gift. It's not something that we work for using our own strength. But, as with all gifts, we need to be willing to receive it as the giver intended. We have the choice of rejecting the gift, or accepting it and living changed lives in response. If we accept the gift of peace and reconciliation, then we are invited, called, encouraged, enabled, to live as part of a new community. The letter to the Ephesians describes the church as the first sign of the new community that will ultimately include the whole of creation. That is a great gift and an awesome responsibility.

What does that mean for the church today, for the congregations, large and small, that gather for worship and for the different denominations into which the church is divided? One thing it means is that there is no longer any room for walls in the church. The Temple in Jerusalem divided men from women and Gentile God-fearers from Jews. There is no place for that division in the church. Any and all walls have been broken down in and by Christ.

That should be obvious, but sadly at various times congregations have been divided along ethnic and racial lines. Just two of what could be many examples: in 1963, speaking at the Western Michigan University, Martin Luther King said: “We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing that Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic.”<sup>1</sup> In twentieth-century South Africa various churches supported apartheid, and in 1961 the white Reformed Churches actually withdrew from the World Council of Churches over the issue.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch Reformed Church still isn’t a member of the WCC, and just this year the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Church declared that “it is not yet ready to admit” the church to the alliance, after suspending it from WARC in 1982, because the Church has not renounced apartheid “fully and completely”.<sup>3</sup> The writer of the letter to the Ephesians would be horrified at the church allowing or supporting or providing the theological justification for a division in the church based on race.

It’s obvious that there’s no place in the church for divisions based on race; we don’t need the author of Ephesians to remind us of that. But maybe we do need the reminder that there should be no divisions based on class or gender or sexuality either. The early church experienced the breaking down of the biggest wall they could imagine when they realised that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. We need to be careful that we haven’t built up new wall in our own time to divide human beings from each other.

What does this mean for the different denominations that gather in different places to worship the one God in so many different ways? The one holy catholic and apostolic church is perhaps the most divided institution in the world. So many people agree that they are worshipping the Triune God, and agree that in Jesus Christ we have seen that one God incarnate, and yet separate to worship. How does that fit with the image of the church as “the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone”?

I think it depends whether the many different denominations are seen as diversity or division. If we gather separately to worship because those different groups provide different styles of worship and have different emphases on the many ways in which to live a Christian life, then I think what we are looking at is a diversity that reflects diversity in God’s creation. Whether we like to worship God through a structured liturgy or complete spontaneity doesn’t really matter. Whether we choose to focus our Christian life primarily on contemplation, prayer and study; or on action and serving the poor also doesn’t matter – although the balanced Christian life involves both work and prayer. But if we claim that we alone are the church, that we alone live the Christian life, that it is only by people worshipping with us that God is being rightly worshipped – then I think the one holy catholic and apostolic church has been sadly and foolishly divided. Christ is our peace; he came preaching peace to those who once far off and those who were close; in his flesh he made both groups into one. For his body, the church, to be divided by walls of hostility today is a scandal. Hence the vital importance of the ecumenical movement in all its manifestations, from the World Council of Churches to our joint services with the Anglicans. The ecumenical movement reminds us, as Ephesians does, that it is only as we are joined together that we are able to signal God’s presence in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wmich.edu/library/archives/mlk/q-a.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/regions/africa/south-africa.html>

<sup>3</sup> John Beita, ‘Renounce Apartheid first, South Africa Church told’

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/renounce.apartheid.first.south.africa.church.told/23472.htm>

There is no place for dividing walls of hostility in the church because the church is the body of Christ, and because the church is a sign of what will ultimately be true for the entire cosmos. When we live out our oneness in Christ we reveal the unity that God is giving to all creation. This is an amazing responsibility for the church. Luckily for us, it is also a gift. We are able to hope for peace and reconciliation because Christ is our peace and reconciliation. In Christ we are no longer strangers and aliens but citizens of God's realm and children of God's household. Thanks be to God. Amen.