

In Jesus Christ there are no walls

Reverend Rebecca Newland
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2 Samuel 7: 1-14a; Psalm 89: 21-38; Ephesians 2: 11-22; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

When David and I were in the Philippines and trekking in the mountain province we got caught up in the beginning of a tribal conflict between two villages. The peace pact between them was broken the evening before we began a walk that went from one to the other. Next time I'll tell you what happened when we got to the next village but on the way there I was asking a lot of questions of our guide — “why has this conflict broken out now”? “Where are the boundaries between the villages' land”? as there were no obvious fences or the like. Our guide explained to me that the villages knew exactly where the boundary was down to the last hillock and rise, plant and waterway. The land may not have been fenced but the barriers were there.

Some things never change. In the place and time of Jesus and Paul of Tarsus there were two types of people — the Jews, the chosen people of God and the Gentiles, basically everybody else. In the culture of Jesus and Paul the Jews were ‘us’ and the gentiles were ‘them’. In the Temple in Jerusalem, there was an actual physical barrier (a low wall) between the Court of Israel and that of the Gentiles. Gentiles crossed this line on pain of death.

We still live in a world of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. We still divide people into the ones we want to associate with and those we want to keep out. Occasionally as I am driving I listen to John Laws. Not because I like his program but because it gives me an insight in to what the average Australian is thinking. The hot topic recently has been the incensed comments from people who think the Australian government should not be trying to help those Australians trapped in Lebanon with dual citizenship — it seems if someone is not 100% like us then we don't want to know them — not really.

Bringing it back closer to home have you ever heard a couple of teenagers organising a party? The us/them language is rife. And if we pay enough attention to our own thought patterns we will pick it up in ourselves.

The us/them phenomenon seems so prevalent that it makes us ask—what is it that makes us want to divide the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’, that causes us to choose sides, to draw dividing lines, to build up walls? It must be something deep down inside in the human heart.

There is one theory I have heard about, based on the work of the French Christian philosopher Rene Girard, that I think is fascinating and also helps us understand the unique role of Jesus Christ in history and in our lives. I struggled with whether I would try and explain it to you as it may appear at first as if it has little to do with the readings but I promise you it does. I hope you think it is worth the journey...

Let me ask you some questions.

How do we learn to be a human being?

How do we learn anything??

What is the mechanism that eventually enables us smile, walk, talk and eat with knives and forks?

It is that we learn to be human by copying what other human beings do.

Like many of you I have loved watching Zara learn to walk. It is so fantastic to see her walking about the church. The primary mechanism that is behind her walking is the fact she is copying each and every one of us. We learn to eat a particular way, to walk and talk by mimicking those around us. We also learn to desire the things other people desire. We mimic

desire. The acquisition of material possessions is the outcome of copying what others strive to possess. That's the basis of keeping up with the Jones'. Advertising is built on this principle too "who wouldn't want to eat special K just like that thin, blonde, beautiful woman"

Now that is all fine until we begin to mimic the desires of another person close to us. This desiring of the same thing as someone else has the potential to create tension within relationships. It creates tension within whole communities. The desiring threatens our access to limited resources. It threatens our sense of self, the sense of our own uniqueness and specialness. Ever turned up to a party in the same outfit as someone else? This problem is a primal and basic facet of community life. What do humans do with that tension and potential for conflict?

To maintain the peace in a community and between ourselves we create a scapegoat. We create a category of persons that we can feel justified in persecuting, in considering less than us. The tension and potential aggression in our own community is re-directed outwards to 'them'. It can be as simple as two women at the same party in the same outfit deciding that some other poor woman really has no sense of style to the complex phenomenon of anti-Semitism and its ensuing horrors. This primary mechanism is what creates the 'us' and 'them'. It creates the walls and barriers in our hearts and the physical ones right down the middle of cities. It fuels the persecution of minorities and is the hidden, dark justification for religious wars. It is the shadow side of all—repeat all—religions. The Ephesians reading calls it the dividing wall of hostility.

This mechanism is so primal, so deeply ingrained, so much a part of who we are as a human community that it takes something extraordinary to expose it and to offer an alternative. It takes something outside the system to reveal to us what is operating.

That something or rather that some one is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was not just another human being, even an enlightened one. He is the Son of God who became one of us. He became a human being in all our facets, even suffering and death. And in word and deed he showed us a different way of looking at 'them', those on the outside, the scapegoats created by communities.

He ate with tax collectors, he dined with prostitutes, he talked with adulterous women, he touched lepers and bleeding women, he hung about with Roman soldiers, he made himself ritually unclean by touching the dead, and he walked with the poor. The power of this man who crossed cultural boundaries was extraordinary. He consistently preached forgiveness and reconciliation. He tore down the idea that the Hebrew God was vengeful and cruel. He preached that his father was a God of love.

But it was in his death and resurrection that these ideas became more than just wishful thinking. When he was crucified he became the scapegoat. He became the ultimate outsider. He became the being who took on himself the violence and aggression at the heart of the community. He was no longer one of us — all, even his closest friends, rejected him. BUT, and this is very important, it was after the resurrection that his followers finally got it.

When he connected with his followers again after the resurrection he offered peace and forgiveness — not condemnation, not more walls, not more barriers and divisions, not more violence and retribution. He offered peace and forgiveness. The scapegoat, the victim of violence, offers peace in return for that violence. Difficult, crazy? You bet.

In the letter to the Ephesians that we heard read from there are the following lines —
(2:13,14,17,19).

13 But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 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....

17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;...

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...

So what does this all mean for us?

Well that is a whole other sermon or two or three but I want to draw your attention to just a couple of things.

Firstly if it is true that as human beings we learn by imitating some one else then we need to carefully choose whom we will imitate. Jesus Christ is the person to emulate bar none for it is in Jesus that we have the example of what true humanity is capable of. In Jesus we have the vision of what we are truly called to become. There is a very kitsch abbreviation that goes around the circles of youth camps and fellowships — WWJD. What Would Jesus Do? It might be kitsch but it always pulls me up short whenever I am struggling to make choices, to act in ways that are God centred and life giving. If I want to “honour and embrace diversity” as our St. Philips vision statement says then Jesus is the one to follow, for in him there is no division, no ‘us’ and no ‘them’.

And secondly, simply copying Jesus is not quite enough, although if we all actually did that what a huge difference it would make. We also need to believe in what he said and did. We need to believe that through his resurrection we are truly brought into a new way of being, a new life. Through faith in Christ we have access to the gift of hope and true peace. We need hope desperately in a cynical, war weary world. We need the hope that comes with the resurrection and the possibility of forgiveness and the peace that it brings.

As I listen to the news at the moment my heart aches for the desperate situation of the innocent people of the middle east. My heart aches for those who have become the scapegoats, the victims of violence. I ask myself — what will make a difference? I believe with the utmost conviction that Jesus Christ is the answer. I know that is not the easiest pill to swallow in our multi-cultural, multi-faith, politicly correct climate. I too would like to believe that if we all just loved each other everything would be OK. But we need more than that. We need more than pious platitudes and wishful thinking. We need the power of the cross and the resurrection. We need the radical perspective of Jesus Christ. We need forgiveness and hope. Only this redeems—anything.

In our communion celebration that follows may we find Christ, the cornerstone of new life. May we find unity with each other, peace and forgiveness. Amen