

Introduction

At my church in Hackney I ran a support group for non-documented migrant women. We called them 'The invisible women'. These were women who had been trafficked, were escaping from war or poverty or fear of death and violence. They came from different countries and all had different stories. The one thing that they all had in common was that they were strangers and aliens in the UK. They didn't have British passports or leave to remain in the UK and they lived in perpetual fear of being arrested and returned to their own countries. These women had no rights, no protection and were amongst the most vulnerable in our community.

As I was studying our passage from Ephesians this week I found myself remembering these women and thinking - "that's a bit how the Jews regarded the Gentiles in New Testament Times" For these women the ultimate end, the pinnacle of achievement was to receive their leave to remain, to become British citizens and to feel they had a right to live here and hold their heads high.

In our passage Paul speaks of the condition of the Gentiles before Jesus came. A Gentile was a non-Jew. Anyone who hadn't been born into the Jewish religion was a Gentile. The Jews looked down on them and despised them.

In the first part of this passage Paul is contrasting the life of a Gentile and a Jew.

1 Called the uncircumcision by those who laid claim to circumcision.

This is the first of the great divisions. Jewish men were circumcised after birth as a sign of their special relationship with God, as a sign of the covenant relationship they have with him. The Jews had intense contempt for Gentiles.

Some of the attitudes and sayings they had were:

- Gentiles were created to fuel the fires of hell.
- God only loved Israel of all the nations he had made
- It was not lawful to give assistance to a Gentile woman in childbirth as that would be to bring another Gentile into the world

The barrier between Jew and Gentile was absolute

- If a Jew married a Gentile the funeral of that person was held.
- Even to go into a Gentile home was to render a Jew unclean

Paul is telling the Ephesian Christians that before Jesus came the barriers were up and goes on to explain how after Jesus's ministry on earth the barriers came down.

2 The Gentiles had no hope of the Messiah

For the Jews history was always going somewhere; no matter what the present was like the future was glorious. To the Gentile history was a journey to nowhere - they had no hope of an afterlife. With the coming of Christ the Gentiles entered into that new view of history in which a person is always on the way to God.

3 Gentiles were aliens from the society of Israel

The name for the people of Israel was "ηο αγιοσ λαοσ" - the holy people: Holy means different - set apart. In what sense was Israel different? Well their only King was God. They were meant to be in a special relationship with him and to serve him only

4. The Gentiles were strangers to the covenants on which the promises were based.

Israel was a covenant people. The Jews believed that God had approached their nation with a special offer, "I will take you for my people and I will be your God." (Ex 6:7)

Covenant relationship involved not only privilege but obligation. It involved the keeping of the law.

If God's design for mankind were to be worked out it needed to be worked out through a nation. God's choice of Israel to be that nation was not favouritism because it was choice not for special honour but for

special responsibility. But it gave the Jews the unique consciousness of being the people of God and ultimately it separated them from all other nations.

5. The Gentiles were people without hope and without God

For those of you who read the Greek philosophers you will have noticed that their thinking sits against a background of melancholy that assumes that at the back of things there is a kind of essential despair. The people of Israel always had a radiant hope in God which burned clearly and inextinguishably even in their darkest and most terrible days. They knew God loved them and had plans for them even if they had rejected and walked away from God's plans. In their hearts the Gentiles only knew despair before Christ came to give them hope.

We have seen how the Jews hated and despised Gentiles. Now Paul uses two pictures which would be especially vivid to a Jew to show that through Jesus hatred is killed and a new unity has come.

First: Those who were far off have been brought near

Second: the middle wall of the barrier has been torn down.

The second image comes from the Temple worship. The Jewish Temple was made up of three courts, each a little higher than the one before.

Outside was the court of the Gentiles, then the court of the women, then the court of the Israelites, inside was the court of the priests and then the Holy of Holies. Between the court of the Gentiles and the court of the women were many notices that said essentially, trespassers will be shot. The Gentile enters the Jewish place of worship on pain of death. The marvellous message of the Gospel is that in Christ these barriers have been demolished.

So how did he destroy them?

He is our peace. In a dispute between two parties you are not likely to get a resolution by a Judge simply issuing a decree or document proclaiming it must be resolved. This always leads to resentment and unresolved anger. But when a person loved by both parties comes between them and brings them together to talk a resolution can be found. Jesus Christ is our peace because it is in the common love of him that people come to love each other.

That peace is won through Christ's blood because the greatest awakener of love is the cross. For me the cross is the whole foundation of my faith.

I have never forgotten the wonder I experienced at the age of 16 when I realised that Jesus had died for me because he loved me so much that he wanted to have a relationship with me. That wonder has never left me and is my whole motivation for life and ministry. Only

when all people love Jesus will they love each other. Treaties and leagues do not produce peace as modern life shows us only too well. There can only be peace in Jesus Christ.

2) Jesus wiped out the law of the commandments with all its decrees. At the heart of the Jewish sacrificial system was the belief that only by keeping the Jewish laws was a person good enough to attain the friendship and fellowship of God. In order to try and make sure they kept the whole of the law the teachers of the law had sub divided each command into hundreds and thousands of decrees about washing of hands, of dishes, page after page about exactly what could and couldn't be done on the Sabbath. The only people who fully kept the Jewish Laws were the Pharisees and they were slaves to the minutiae. Their response to God was not one of love it was a punitive legalism. A religion based on all kinds of rules and regulations about sacred rituals can never be a universal religion.

Paul said in Romans 10:4 Christ is the end of the law. Jesus ended legalism as a principle of religion. Jesus came to tell human beings that they cannot earn God's approval by keeping the ceremonial law but must accept the forgiveness and fellowship which God in mercy freely offers.

There is a story of French soldier in the war who was denied burial in a Catholic graveyard by a priest

because they couldn't prove he was a baptised catholic; so he was buried outside the fence. His fellow soldiers came back to tend the grave and found no sign of his grave outside the fence. The priest had moved the fence to include the soldier's grave. Rules and regulation put up the fence but love moved it.

Paul then goes on to tell of the priceless gifts which come with the new unity in Christ:

1) He made **both** Jews and Gentiles as one new human being

In Greek there are two words for new

- νεος - neos which means new in time

- Καινος - kainos which means new in quality.

A thing which is καινος is new in the sense that it brings into the world a new quality which didn't exist before. The word Paul uses here is καινος. He says that Jesus brings together Jews and Greeks and from them produces one new kind of person – a Christian. Chrysostom, a famous preacher of the early Church said: "It is as if one should melt down a statue of silver and a statue of lead and the two should come out gold.

However, it is important to note that the unity that Jesus achieves is not achieved by blotting out all racial characteristics but by making all people of all nations into Christians. Bringing someone to faith in Christ does not mean making them like us culturally and socially it means bringing them into faith and allowing

them to retain their uniqueness. This is a mistake Christians have made over the years from the first missionaries in Africa to us today where we still have a feeling that for people to become Christian they have to become like us. It is not Jesus' purpose to turn us all into one nation but into people of each culture who are Christians. Our unity comes from Jesus and not in any external change.

2) Jesus reconciled us all to God. He brings together people who are estranged

3) Through Jesus Jew and Gentile have the right of access to God

So

We are no longer foreigners but full members of the family of God and the picture Paul uses is that of every Christian being a stone built into the church. Of the whole church the corner stone is Christ who holds us together and provides a building which is true.

Regeneration of a building - Foxton Church 6 buildings - one church

Jesus through his death on the cross has removed the barriers between us and God, and Us and other people. He brings together all people and through faith in him transforms us into one people in relationship with our heavenly Father .