

Ephesians 2:11-22

In today's passage the apostle Paul addresses one particular challenge in the church in Ephesus – that church was a composite church where some were Jews, some were Gentiles. This meant different background, different way of thinking, acting, different values and ways of doing things. A difficult state of affairs. The very fact that Paul speaks of their unity in Christ despite the differences points to the fact that it was a real challenge in the church.

What's new? We're still struggling with our unity even though nowadays we have far less diverse churches – we tend to gather according to our class, background, colour of skin, theology or worship style. It's easier although not always easy and simple. But certainly it avoids a number of issues.

But still getting on with other people is challenging. Think of families. We are of one blood and share the genes and yet we are so different. Some of us like crime fiction, some don't. Some buy dog food for their pets, some give them scraps from their own table. Some have tattoos, for others it would be a taboo. We can be on opposite ends of the political, religious and any other spectrum. And yet we belong to one family – however challenging our Christmas gatherings might be.

The same with the Church. We have different likes and dislikes, some like speaking to your neighbour during worship, some hate it. Some are passionate about pastoral care, some are passionate about mission, some want to simply come along on a Sunday and not be drawn into anything else. And yet so much unites us – Jesus himself. We have one Lord and even though we might use different terms to speak of him and understand the Bible in many different ways, we're still united by being Jesus followers. That's priceless.

So we are different – we know this. Had it not been for the church, we would never have anything in common with many around us. Now – in the church we are called to live peacefully with one another regardless of our differences in the outside world. Not because those differences don't matter because they do but because Jesus calls us to peace with one another. That peace is a sign and witness to the world. That peace is our mission statement. If you thought Christmas gathering might be a challenge, check this out – peace in the church.

What is peace in a diverse community? Israelites greet one another with this word: Shalom. Peace. They say it when they meet and when they part company. Shalom. The apostle Paul always began and ended his letters in this specifically Jewish way. The Letter to the Ephesians started with: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It will end with: Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Beautiful Jewish custom.

The root word for shalom is shelem which means total. Shalom then is all encompassing – it's health, wealth, well-being, peace with your neighbour, auntie and employer.

One of my favourite preachers, Edward Marquart, whom I quote quite a bit, writes powerfully about peace. Today I quote from his sermon at length: ‘Shalom is shelem, and shelem means totality. God’s peace touches all realities of our lives. It is finding peace with death. Having recently almost died, I now know first hand what it means to finding peace about your own death. (...) A person needs to make peace with your cancer, your body growing older, your body falling apart, even while at the same time fighting the disease that is attacking you. But underneath it all, you need to make peace with your cancer, your heart ailment, your leukemia, your divorce, your ex-spouse, your children, your situation in life that you don’t like. Shelem. God’s peace affects the totality of your life. God’s peace is for all situations, for always. (...)’

God’s peace is not running away from conflict and joining a church where everybody has the same ideas that you have and therefore there is no conflict in your church because everybody thinks the same. God’s peace is not running away from conflict to all of your friends who think and act just the way you do. The essence of friendship for many people is to find friends who think and act just the way they do. In fact, for many people, peace is the absence of conflict and so they run away from the real world to find people who think and act just as they do. (...)

God’s peace is not to run away from the chaos and the conflict all around us and inside of us. God’s peace is living in a chaotic situation called life, and there in this chaotic situation, to find God’s peace within and God’s peace between. Shalom and shelem is not running away from the conflicts of life, but living peacefully in them.’¹

In some ways we’re going back to the message from last week – we need to feel blessed before we can be a blessing to others. This week we are reminded that we need to be at peace with ourselves and our life circumstances in order to be agents of peace in our church and community. We cannot bring peace anywhere if we don’t first find it inside.

We live in a hugely divided world. We’re divided over immigration, politics, religion, economy. Our society is polarised over Brexit and Scottish independence. The (no longer) United States of America are fraught with the tension between making America great again and being part of the world community. Poland is hugely divided over an increasingly totalitarian government – three days ago Poland’s lower house of parliament has voted through controversial new reforms which will see all Supreme Court judges removed and replaced by government’s own appointees. But it all becomes very personal. In my family my dad and his wife are on one side of the debate (if that’s what you can call it), my mum, my brother and I on the other side. I unfollowed by dad’s Facebook profile in order not to get upset by his comments, conspiracy theories and other posts that in no way reflect what I believe in. I remained friends with him on Facebook so he doesn’t know I don’t read any of his posts! Clever!

That’s only a symptom of a greater truth though – the world’s become militant in its divisions. How do we peacefully live in it? There was maybe never more need for being counter-cultural than today. We need to be at peace with one another despite our

¹ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/books_ephesians_thepeace.htm.

differences and disagreements. We need to live side by side and work for peace and shalom of the whole world. We need to start at home, in our own church and in our own community.

‘For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility (...) Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.’ Amen.