

Minster, 10.30am, Sun Oct 28<sup>th</sup> 2012 – Simon and Jude

Readings:     Is 28:14-16     Eph 2:19-22     John 15:17-end

Theme:        Unity in the household of God

Aims:          To spark thought about The Vision Thing – what sort of church *should* we be? And what to do, to be it?

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**Walls** are used for all sorts of things.

They can be used for building houses or beautiful buildings, like this Minster.

Or they can be used to building helpful partions between peoples' land, so we know which bit's our garden and which bit is our neighbour's.

Or, of course, they can be used to stop people crossing a border or encroaching into other people's land.

Or to keep different people apart.

In the history of the world, there have been many walls built to keep people apart: the Berlin Wall, built after the end of World War 2 as part of the Iron Curtain, to keep communist East Berliners away from the capitalist West. Or the many so-called 'peace walls' built in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to keep Catholic and Protestant Communities apart – and they are still there, even after the 1994 Peace Agreement. Or, of course, the Israeli West Bank Barrier, the high wall built to separate Israel from the Palestinian West Bank.

Walls – both real and metaphorical - can keep people apart.

And there was, in the first century, a metaphorical wall between the Jewish nation and everybody else; a wall symbolised by two real things – the barrier in the Temple beyond which no Gentile could go; and the Law, the rules of which separated Jews from Gentiles and which included circumcision, the physical symbol carried by every male Jew that showed he belonged.

The Apostle Paul was born a Jew in a Gentile world. Paul felt that, as a Christian, he had a very specific calling which was to prove a challenge to the early Christian church. He was called to be part of the revelation of God to the Gentiles – those people who had, for millenia, been cut off from God's blessing and grace. He took part in God's deconstruction of the wall that kept them apart.

We heard earlier a few verses from chapter 2 of the book of Ephesians which summarise Paul's thinking about the new place of Gentiles in the household of God:

“So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.”

It was Paul's experience that God wanted to break down the barriers that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles, by the work that Jesus Christ had done through his death and resurrection. He writes about it

in many of his letters, but there is that well-known phrase by Paul from Galatians chapter 3:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”  
(Gal 3:28)

It was Paul’s belief that God’s blessing was now open to ALL – that non-Jews were no longer strangers and aliens to God but had now become citizens and members of the household of God. This household was built on the foundations laid by the apostles and prophets but had as its *cornerstone* Jesus Christ himself.

A cornerstone is an important part of a building. It’s part of the foundations, laid at a corner in such a way that the rest of the building is built in alignment to it. It acts as a 3-dimensional plumbline, if you like.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, we heard a verse that says, “Therefore thus says the Lord God, ‘See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation’.” (Is 28:16)

To first century Christians, this verse (and another like it in Psalm 118) was interpreted as talking about the future Messiah and is quoted extensively in the New Testament. Paul, Peter and the gospel writers used it to help explain the important role of Jesus in the new era they found themselves in.

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone which joins the whole structure together and all Christians are part of this structure – like a brick in the wall – in

God we are being built together spiritually, into a dwelling-place for God.

The Church, then, is a dwelling-place for God. It is here that God lives. He lives here through our faith in Jesus Christ, and in our aligning our lives to Jesus’ example. The edges of our brick will be aligned to the edges of his cornerstone. We’re all in this spiritual building together, Jew, Greek, slave, free, male female – and, we could add, blue-eyed and brown-eyed, right-handed and left-handed, tall and short, gay and straight, young and old...the list could be endless.

God has made it possible for us all to know him.

To quote a well-used phrase, ‘we’re all in this together’...

This is the church of which we are a part.

This is a vision of the church to which we belong.

We’ve been challenged recently by Jeremy, our vicar, to contribute to the conversation about ‘The Vision Thing’, as he’s called it. To take part in finding out what we as a Church are about, why we’re here, what we’re striving for.

And something that has already surfaced is the fact that, in a big parish like ours, people can become a member of a group (large or small) which doesn’t have much to do with other groups in the church. We can be a collection of groups whose members have something in common with each other, perhaps age or a particular interest or job, but who don’t ever meet other groups. We can end up erecting metaphorical walls between ourselves.

But is this the church we are called to be?

It might be *easier* for us to operate in this way. It might be more convenient and less challenging not to have to speak to or work with people who are different to us.

But is it the right way?

The situation with the Jews and Gentiles (and also, reflected in the building of the Israeli wall today) is that of all the differences between people, *one* of them becomes the focus for the division. If we translate that to our church today, one way which often becomes the focus, for us, of difference is that of *age*.

The Church of England has a history of segregating its congregations according to age, a habit which goes back to the establishment of the first church schools, which were held on Sundays. And although gradually the education of children has been taken over by the state, the habit of separating children from adults, especially in worship, has continued.

Now here, we're fortunate – we always have a variety of ages represented in this parish communion service because of our flourishing choir! In fact, this service can be said to be more 'all age' than our monthly All Age service....and this is a fact which we, as clergy, are beginning to discuss.

What does it mean for us, as a parish, to worship with all ages together? And what are we going to do to enable it to happen successfully?

What sort of walls can *you* see that exist between different groups within this parish, this local part of the household of God? Can you imagine how life would be different if they were taken down, the bricks lying there all over the floor...? We could see the people behind them, we could reach out, shake hands, smile... start to do things together, differently.

So what can we do to deconstruct the walls? Well, here are just a few obvious suggestions. First, we could pray. As we pray, we could look at our own habits and bring them before God, asking Him to show us how and where change is possible. We could ask forgiveness for times when we've been hard-hearted or judgemental about other people, especially those we don't know. We could ask for opportunities to reach out, to bridge the gap, to learn to smile at each other. We could share the peace with someone we don't know...(!); or we could go to something we don't normally go to, like the youth worship on a Weds evening.

Why is this important? Because the effectiveness of the *growing* household of God depends on the harmonious inter-relatedness of the whole structure. If we are to function as a dwelling place for God, we need to work at working together. We need to be building healthy relationships within this household; healthy relationships which include the habit of saying sorry and the giving and receiving of forgiveness; relationships which are based on honesty, love and compassion; which are aligned to the example of Jesus, our cornerstone.

Imagine the world without the need for walls to keep people apart. A world where, by contrast, walls come *down* to give people freedom to know each other.

Imagine our parish without the walls that we construct between us...where we can trust each other and build relationships which witness to our experience of God's love, forgiveness and compassion.

As we continue to live as members of the household of God, let's keep in mind the vision of the Church as the apostle Paul saw it. A church that is joined together in Jesus Christ and that *grows* continuously into a holy temple in the Lord, by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.