

July 19 2009

Sunday 15B (off RCL)

Sermon notes on Ephesians 2.11-22

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Some introductory Comments

Once again we encounter in this passage an enormous amount of material. Paul begins by describing first the relationship which has stood up until this time between the Jews and the Gentiles – it being Gentiles to whom he now writes. The sign of circumcision stood as a distinguishing characteristic pointing to a deep divide which separated Jew and Gentile.

This, however, is overcome, Paul declares, in the “flesh” of Jesus, in which the “dividing wall” is broken down and in which a new single humanity is created out of the two separated humanities which had existed beforehand.

We will hear in the *next* reading we take from Ephesians (Sunday week) that this is, in fact, the “mystery” of the Christian faith: the Gentiles (us!) becoming co-heirs with the people of Israel in the promises, through Jesus Christ.

Today we will focus on the theme of “household of God” as it appears in the reading, and on the abolition of the law in Christ as the means of populating this house.

The Sermon

The Greek word for “house” is “oikos” – a word rather strange and unfamiliar to our ears. Yet this little word is in fact hidden at the root of some of the biggest ideas and concerns which exercise us today: economy, ecology, ecumené (more familiar as the adjective “ecumenical”) “Oikos” is almost lost from sight in these words in English, and remains only as the “e” and “c” at their beginning, but its presence is important because it reminds us what is at the heart of these three ideas: the thought of a “house”, a place within which we live. “Economy” originally related to the management of a household, ecology is concerned with the study of the “house”, and ecumenism, in its broadest possible meaning, has also to do with our habitat and how we inhabit it.¹

Now the point of noting this is not to deliver a lesson in grammar but to broaden our perception of what these rather large and apparently quite separate ideas are concerned with. How we trade, and the relationship between our trading and our environment, and the relationship between our

trading and our environment and our political, social and religious divisions – all these have to do with a common theme of the house: the character of the world within which we live, and what that character has to do with *how* we live. Recognising this is important for the relevance to us of today’s passage from Ephesians because, despite the way it has been translated into English, that little word “oikos” abounds in the text, especially towards the end. An over-literal translation of the last few verses might run like this:

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and outside the house [NRSV aliens], but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole house [NRSV structure] is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are made a house [NRSV built together] spiritually into a house [NRSV dwelling place] for God.²

If you were to open a newspaper or listen to a news bulletin, you would find it filled with concerns about the economy, our ecology and environment, and ecumenism (not ecumenism in the religious sense but in its broadest sense of the relations between peoples who are different in significant ways). Whatever it is which all

¹ Etymologies according to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company: Economy: Middle English *yconomye*, management of a household, from Latin *oeconomia*, from Greek *oikonomia*, from *oikonomos*, one who manages a household : *oikos*, house + *nemein*, to allot, manage; Ecology: German *Ökologie* : Greek *oikos*, house + German *-logie*, study (from Greek *-logia*); Ecumenical: From Late Latin *oecumenicus*, from Greek *oikoumenikos*, from (*hê*) *oikoumenê* (*gê*), (the) inhabited (world), feminine present passive participle of *oikein*, to inhabit, from *oikos*, house.

² “Oikos”/house appears in the Greek as part of various compound words which yield the different translations we have into English. It is also worth noting that the idea of “city” – closely related to that of “house”, also appears a couple of times in the whole passage: v.19 – citi-zens, v.12 citi-zenship (NRSV translates this as “commonwealth”).

those concerns are grasping after, it is just this thing which Paul is addressing in our Ephesians reading this morning. As religious or “Christian” as the passage might seem, it is in fact concerned with the very things which make us anxious and drain our energies today: what should be the shape of our life together? What *is* the house of humankind, who may live there, and how? It is in response to these questions, whether implicit or explicit in our economics, or ecology and our ecumenics, that Paul declares what we’ve heard here. *We* have only to consider whether or not his answer is better than any we would make for ourselves.

So, noting that Paul’s topic “fits” in this way with our contemporary concerns, what does he say about the “house” of humankind? For the sake of time we’ll have to strip our account down to the basics. Paul presents an image of a house of *peace*. Yet this is a peace which has come out of an extraordinary division – that between Jew and Gentile. This is a division known to us today – Gentiles that we are – really only through the teaching of the scriptures themselves. The ongoing challenges of the politics of the Middle East, while not unrelated to the ancient distinction of Jew and Gentile, don’t get to the heart of the matter which Paul describes here. The relationship between Jew and Gentile here is not one of misunderstanding or xenophobia but runs much more deeply than this. The one is basically defined *over against* the other. “Gentile” is not simply “different”, but “not-Jew”, and this, at least in the mind and practice of the Jews of Paul’s time, was a relationship which had a thoroughgoing *theological* justification: the distinction between Jew and Gentile was a matter of how God had ordered the world.

There is no middle ground here, no mediator who is outside of this radical difference who can call the two to neutral ground, for God himself – the only possible candidate for such a mediator – had set the distinction in place. If we ourselves don’t *feel* the Jew-Gentile thing in the same way that Paul and his contemporaries did, then we must at least understand what it was at stake for those caught up in it. This is not something which can be argued away. The Jews who become Christians and, eventually, who happily received Gentile as brothers and sisters in Christ, did not come to a new understanding of Gentiles as “also human beings like us”. They came to a new understanding of God which arose from a new understanding of *themselves* in the light of recognising Jesus as the Christ.

So, the divide between Jew and Gentile is extreme. What, then, can overcome it? What does Jesus do to break down the “dividing wall”, as Paul calls it? Paul’s answer is extraordinary: Jesus “abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances”, in order to create one new humanity out of the two divided humanities. Peace comes from the abolition of “the law”.

Now what Paul means here hinges on what we understand by law. Only the Jews, of course, have “the law”, in the sense of the commandments given to Moses and forming the basic religious and moral code of Israel. Yet, in his letter to the Romans (Romans 2), Paul remarks that God’s law is something which the Gentiles also know instinctively, and so, should they fail in observing it, they fail before God in the same way as he argues the Jews do. His intention at that point in Romans is to prove that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3.22f), with the “all” denoting not simply “everyone” but more specifically “Jew and Gentile alike”. “The law” represents, for Paul, the point of falling away from right relationship with God.

This brings us to two important theological points. The first is that our failures with the commandments are failures in our relationship to God. This might seem obvious, but it needs to be said to clarify the nature of human division and enmity. In Ephesians 2 Jesus overcomes the fundamental divisions in human relationships by “abolishing the law”. That is, Jesus deals with what is wrong between you and I by dealing with the source of the wrongness which exists between me and *God*, and you and *God*. This means that, *human* division and hostility arises from the failure of *Jew and Gentile alike* to stand rightly before God. Put most simply, human division and hostility is a theological problem, and not simply a “moral” one.

And this brings us to the second important theological point: peace does not come from more law, but from less.³ Now, Paul doesn’t mean that fundamental morals for human engagement are abolished; in this sense we are still under direction to live moral lives. But he does mean that such morals are not the final court for establishing who or what we are. The “less” law which applies here is the removal of a moral or legal test for our standing before God. In Galatians (3.19ff) Paul talks of the law as a tutor, or disciplinarian, or even “nanny”. The image is of a child who needs to be trained and, until she develops into self-awareness of her status in the family, lives as one not yet fully mature or settled into her true identity. As such, favour is found by her willingness and ability to do as the tutor or nanny tells her.

The distinction Paul draws here is between the one who *earns* favour by what she does, and the one who simply *has* it by virtue of what she *is* –

³ Reflect upon how strange a proposal this is. For us, in our management of our societies and our wider politics, what we call “peace” comes not through the abolition of law but through its proliferation. The more laws there are – with the power and authority to enforce them – the safer we feel, and the more peaceful our lives at least *appear*. The *abolition* of law – lawlessness – denotes for us the opposite of peace.

loved as a child ("son" in Greek). This is the meaning of Paul's abolition of the law. What matters is not what we do but what we are, "in Christ", before God.

This always sounds permissive, both in the church and out of it, an easy way out in which we are allowed to do as we wish and God will simply "forgive". But in fact it is extraordinarily difficult to live as if faith, and not "works of the law" (Ephesians 2.9) were enough. It is much easier to have faith in what we do than it is to have faith in faith. It is much easier, to borrow from the parable of the Prodigal, to be our Father's servant than to be his son. It is not easy to believe that faith is enough because we live in a world in which our place in the "house" of humanity is determined by the *kind* of person we are, and not simply by the fact that we *are* a person.

Yet there is a great freedom in this. We *are* free in that we are loved by God. We are free to fall, and to confess, and to move on again. And we are then freed ourselves to become freeing for others we would otherwise judge to be unworthy of a place in the "house". Paul's vision is that we all have in common failure in the law, but that this not a problem unless we believe our legal and moral achievements to be the way to peace with God and peace with each other.

If we have faith that faith *is* enough, then we move from a relationship of *servant* into being God's *children*. Then, as Paul indicates in a subtle shift at the end of this morning's passage, it becomes the case not simply that we have found a place in God's house, but *we* become the place where *God* Godself dwells (2.22).

Human life as God's house – "heaven" if you will (and even if you won't!) – this is the promise of the possibility of a true peace, here and now, the resolution of our anxieties about economics and ecology and ecumenics.

This is a promise worth looking into, for our attempts to order our house by other means have yet proven that Paul is right at least in one thing: more law does not bring peace. Perhaps, then, we might consider whether, according to God's offer in Christ, a little less law might do the trick.