

2 August 2009

Sunday 18B (off RCL)

Sermon notes on Ephesians 3.1-13

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Introductory Notes

In our Ephesians reading this morning one of the dominant themes is that of the “mystery” which has been made known in God’s work in Christ – the incorporation of the Gentiles into one body with the Jews, all now being co-sharers in God’s promises. This mystery (or, perhaps better, “secret”) is what Paul identifies as in fact being the good news.

In the reading we heard a couple of weeks ago (Ephesians 2.11-22) Paul wrote of Christ as having broken down the “dividing wall” which stood between Jew and Gentile. The division being dealt with, God now built a new “house” for himself in the new humanity which Christ had achieved. The good news has to do with God’s desire and work to bring peace to all peoples – Jew and Gentile alike – and this God has done in Jesus.

Sermon

I found myself struggling this week to discover what, in this reading from Ephesians, might be good news for us today. For it seems to me that the vision of a new and united humanity, within which divisions are overcome and hostility has been put to death, is one which we know these days quite apart from the word of Scripture. If you felt inclined to look up an internet site on modern humanism all sorts of grand visions for a united and loving humanity could be found, usually on the condition that all religion first be done away with.

Perhaps the most famous statement of such a vision in recent times is that in John Lennon’s song “Imagine”:

Imagine there’s no Heaven... Imagine all the people living for today // Imagine there’s no countries... Nothing to kill or die for and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace // Imagine... no need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man; imagine all the people sharing all the world.

Now, it may be that these modern visions of a united humanity have sprung from our Christian heritage – or it may not. In fact it doesn’t really matter where they’ve come from, for we have to take seriously that these visions often desire to be radically non-religious. The question which is interesting – and one to which Christians need to have an answer, lest they might have chosen the wrong way to spend a Sunday morning – is whether, when we read this text from Ephesians, Paul now says to us anything which we don’t already know. Has the contemporary western liberal politics of inclusion already brought us to where Paul would have us be, without the need for all his talk of God in Christ, blood and the cross? We hear about the need to love one

another daily on talk-back radio, in newspapers and TV current affairs (especially those of the “tabloid” variety), from Prime Ministers and all too blandly from the average pulpit. Love, *we all know*, is “what the world needs now”. If what Paul *is* doing in our reading today is calling us to love one another then it would have to be said that there is no *gospel* here – no *good news*, firstly because there is nothing *new* (for we already know about the need to better love one of another) and, secondly because there is nothing *good* about being told to love someone who we already don’t love for what seem to us to be very good reasons.

But, as he speaks about the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile here, Paul is in fact not speaking of what we must do. He speaks rather of what *God* has *done*. But perhaps more importantly for understanding the ethics here, the difference between what Paul announces here and what we know in our politics today is the sheer *difficulty* of what he declares God has achieved. We have tendency to hear what *God* has done to be a statement about what *we* should do. So when Paul talks here about the reconciliation of radical difference, we imagine that this is an imperative directed at us: *become* reconciled, love one another. But this is the fundamental movement of unbelief – to imagine that a statement about God is really a statement about ourselves (and vice-versa). To the extent that reconciliation is *our* effort, then there is no call for the praise of God. That is, to the extent that we imagine that we must do the work, it is just that – work. It is implied that there is nothing which we ourselves cannot overcome, and that we just have to get on with it.

Now, there *is* much which must be done – much which we must do – but this is the second movement in the action, the response to what has gone first. Paul gushes over with enthusiasm and marvelling in these opening three chapters of

Ephesians because he has discovered in Christ something extraordinary, something which makes all the difference, something unexpected and quite beyond his own capacity to have imagined, let alone actually to have achieved (cf. 3.20).

For it is *extraordinarily difficult* to bring about a real change in human relationships – to see peace break out around us, and remain. The moral mind knows that Jews and Gentiles “ought” to get along with each other (or any other divisions between peoples be overcome). But the moral mind can’t actually make that happen. When, in another place, Paul declares that 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” (Galatians 3.28; cf. Colossians 3.11), he is not saying that we all need to get along together. He is talking, rather, about a seemingly impossible thing having happened – that our differences are no longer a grounds for division between us.

When we talk in the church about impossible relationships, this is usually cast for in terms of the impossibility of a holy God loving or forgiving sinners. The old theories of the atonement saw this impossibility being dealt with in terms of a transaction within some economy of exchange – Jesus in our place, or a buying-off of the devil, or similar. The great work here is that God forgives sin, and this is the thing which is celebrated.

But in our Ephesians reading this morning a different tack is taken: what is impossible is not that we sinners might be forgiven but that might have a positive relationship with each other. The important thing to recognize is that that these two apparent impossibilities – that God might have a positive relationship with us, and that we might have positive relationships with each other – *are the same*. If we have fallen out of love with each other, we have fallen out of love with God. To understand what it takes for God to forgive sin, we need only to consider what it would take for us to forgive this or that thing which has happened to us, or even sometimes to forgive ourselves. When we pray for forgiveness – this is the game we play. A true declaration of forgiveness – from us or to us – is a truly extraordinary thing!

Paul says here so much more than what our contemporary politics of inclusion knows: What is lacking in most moral imperatives to love our neighbour is a recognition of just how hard it is to love – even that it may be impossible, particularly as people become more and more different from us. The distance between Jew and Gentile was, for Paul (Saul) and his Jewish fellows, enormous. But Paul declares that the overcoming of this distance is the same as the

overcoming of whatever distance stands between me and God, or you and God; bridging the one gap is the same as the other.

This bridging is something which has both begun in Christ, and yet not been completed for us. In Christ we see divided humanity brought together – the promise that we will all be one in God. In ourselves we see that those divisions are not yet overcome, and so we *are* called to work on them. Jesus declared to us, “whoever who would be my disciple must take up his or her own cross and follow me.” This is not simply a matter of “believing”; it is about believing particular things. And these things are not such as whether God exists or one should go to church. Much more importantly, what we are to believe are things we really have to describe as *political, or social or relational*. They have to do with human relations, how we value each other for better or for worse, how we assess ourselves and our actions, how we express what matters and where we find our true selves. Christian belief has to do the impossibility of love, and God’s having overcome that impossibility through *his* love for us in Jesus. That God overcomes this impossibility takes shape not in our hearts but in our relationships with each other.

And so our lives as Christians are marked by two things: First, we confess that God has worked, and continues to work, to bring about a loving reconciliation of the divisions of humankind. And, second, as we live our partially reconciled lives, we also confess along the way that in our lives with each other we yet fall short of the love that God has shown, and seek forgiveness from God and those around us, that we might yet continue further along the way with God and with each other. This is the gospel – that peace has come, and is coming – and that God has chosen us as the place where it is to begin.

For that, thanks be to God. Amen.