

Stranger?

Imagine the scene... It's a dark and stormy night... the welcome lights from the pub spread a warm glow. As the door opens with a creak... we hear the rising sound of music and voices from within ... but when everyone turns to look at the figure standing in the open doorway... the chatter ceases, musicians stop playing and an awkward silence descends... there's a stranger in town...

This is a caricature... a popular movie scene – think *the Wicker Man* or *American Werewolf in London...or The World's End...* but at some point in our lives there's a good chance that all of us have experienced being a stranger... Let's face it, if you live in a village, you are still DFL (down from London) or similar even after 50 years... (though I wonder whether that's perhaps more a thing we say than the reality).

In today's first bible reading, the writer of a circular letter to Christians in Ephesus (who may or may not be Paul) is talking about being an outsider ... being *other*... the writer is, it seems, themselves Jewish... by birth and upbringing one of God's people...

And they are writing to a bunch of people who are neither of these... the *you* - the letter's recipients - are the outsiders, from the perspective of the Jewish person who has written the letter... they are the *uncircumcision*, meaning they are not part of God's covenant with Abraham ... as the writer puts it, they are *strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*.

I wonder, what memories do we have of being an outsider? At work when we've changed jobs... or maybe if we've been new in the neighbourhood... or new to faith, perhaps... discovering just how weird church is!

The point about considering the Christians at Ephesus to be strangers is revealed in what follows....an account of God's movement of loving embrace of the world and its people... to bring together those who have always been close to God (God's ancient people, Israel) and those who have been further away... Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God is drawing people together - *now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*, they write. Through what Jesus has done, there is to be no more in-crowd and out crowd... no more Jews versus Greeks, slaves versus free, male versus female... no more polarisation... the old divisions can be put away...

Since we gathered last week, the England men's football team has lost a championship and a manager. More than one commentator has observed that Gareth Southgate's legacy to English football is about how he created a new culture in the England team... instead of a divided changing room full of disaffected prima donnas, Southgate has developed a group of players who want to work together... who consider him and each other their friends...

I am not saying that Mr Southgate is a football messiah... (the England team did lose, after all), but I do think what some people say he's done is quite like the kind of thing this letter writer is saying about the unity that we find in Christ. Unity is not making one culture or viewpoint dominate the other... making one group give up its identity to become like the other... unity is about creating a new, shared perspective...*both of us*, the writer says, *have access in one Spirit to the Father*.

Now, of course, we can't do this for ourselves... we are too stuck in our old ways... we are too at home with our prejudices and preferences. The letter writer makes that clear... the initiative and the action is with God... the work is what Jesus does...

Notice how the writer says *he is our peace*... not he makes peace... or he is the prince of peace... a kind of peaceable figurehead.... No... *he is our peace*...

Peace is something that happens in Jesus' actual body... *in his flesh he has made both groups into one*...and he has created *in himself one new humanity in place of the two*,

This peace involves reconciliation of the opposing groups. Here, it's Jews and non-Jews... but we might like to think about what those opposing groups could be today... liberals and traditionalists in the church, for example! This reconciliation covers putting to death hostility... the wrong things we feel for those who are not like us... the suspicion, fear, disdain... as well as the practical things that get in the way... Here, that's putting aside the expectation (from the law) of circumcision for those who want to be Christian... but, again, we might like to think about those practical things that get in the way of unity... like expectations of behaviour (you know - the this is my pew thing) ... the kind of language we use... the songs we sing...

When the writer begins to think about the end result of unity, they use the image of a building ... This new humanity that Christ through his giving up of himself has created, is a building that is built on Christ...

The writer says Jesus is the cornerstone... Now originally the cornerstone was the first stone set in the foundation... all the other stones are set in reference to this one stone... The whole building is constructed in alignment with it... the cornerstone determines the way that beams and walls and roof are put together...

This is who Jesus is for the church. Who we are, what we are as church, is oriented around him... Our character - as a loving and caring assembly of people - is shaped by the compassion of Christ.

Today's passage ends with these words:

In Jesus the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

That's our ambition... to be like that...to be built together spiritually... into a dwelling place for God. And moreover, to be a building that - unlike the movie conventions - welcomes everyone... without distinction... people from the inside and the outside... and offers a place for everyone to flourish...