

Breaking Down Divisions

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon at St Peter's, Wolvercote, on Sunday 19th July, 2009

Ephesians 2, 14

'For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us'.

Paul speaks of a religious dividing wall, that between Jews and Gentiles. He is addressing Gentiles, and his words underline the extraordinary status of Gentiles in Jewish eyes at that time: 'aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.' This was physically symbolised in the Jewish Temple. The Temple consisted of a series of courts, each one a little higher than the last, with the Temple itself in the inmost court. The first, outer, court was the only one into which the Gentiles could enter – to go further was forbidden on pain of death. It is difficult to imagine a stronger barrier.

We are constantly told today that we live in a globalising world. A Korean academic, Kenichi Ohmae, even claims that we live in a borderless world in which nation states are increasingly irrelevant in the face of giant multi-national corporations. I suspect few people would elect to swap nation-states for control by multinationals, but culturally and politically we are, fortunately, quite some way from such a fate. Tragically, however, we continue to live in a world full of dividing walls. In some cases, they are quite literally that – it is only two decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall, perhaps the most dramatic example in history of the strengthening of a boundary in order to imprison people within an ideological system. Crossing the wall without permission was, like the wall of the Temple, to risk death, and many who tried to escape met that fate. Other such barriers which still survive, most tragically in Korea, where desperate North Koreans risk their lives to escape to China.

For many millions of people the problem is not leaving their own countries but gaining acceptance in another: Mexicans nicknamed 'wetbacks' when they swim across the Rio Grande and brave the desert heat on foot to cross into the United States; Africans who risk their lives on overcrowded small boats to cross the Mediterranean from North Africa to Spain or to Lampedusa, the southernmost Italian island in the Mediterranean, and so enter the coveted 'Fortress Europe'.

There are also the walls which are there to divide people – to keep them apart. When I took a student field trip to Belfast three years ago I was shocked at the height and length of the various sections of the so-called 'Peace Wall' which still divides the inner parts of the city, trying to imagine what it must be like to live in the terraced houses next to the wall, to wake up in the morning and confront this barrier of concrete surmounted by several feet of barbed wire. Cyprus has its 'green line', a buffer zone manned by UN troops and running through the heart of Nicosia, or Lefkosa, as the Turkish Cypriots in the north call their part of the city. South Africa used 'buffer zones' to keep apart whites, coloured, Indians and Africans in its cities under apartheid: it tried to use effective barriers such as rivers, railways or industrial

areas rather than open land, for fear that children of different races might play together. And Israel too has now built its own wall, dubbed the 'apartheid wall' by Palestinians for whom it is yet one more barrier to their freedom of movement, even separating many from the lands they farm. There is a common theme in all these examples: the barriers are there, supposedly, to maintain peace. Such is the depth of division between these sections of humanity, it is maintained, that physical separation is the only solution. Some of you will remember Alan Paton, the leader of the South African Liberal Party before it was forced to disband, and author of 'Cry the beloved country'. In 1958 he wrote words which sum up the tragedy of all such barriers: 'Harmony through separation – what a fantastic ideal! It presupposes a physical means to a spiritual goal'.

Separation to keep the peace can never be more than an interim solution, and it comes with costs – the walls that separate are powerful symbols of division, of antagonism, and where they are imposed by one side rather than a product of mutual consent, they are symbols of power and domination. They must inevitably exacerbate divisions and breed resentment. They prolong conflict and prevent the degree of interaction and co-operation which is essential if people are to get to know one another rather than live with their stereotypes and caricatures of 'the other'.

When two are people locked in disagreement, they may go to law about it. Eventually a legal agreement may be drawn up which both reluctantly accept, but the chances are that the breach is not healed, for true peace is seldom made through a legal document. A much better way to bring people together, if it were possible, would be through someone they both love. That, Paul is saying, is what Jesus does. He *is* our peace. It is through a common love of him that people may come to love one another. Treaties and alliances do not produce lasting peace: that can only come when all people come together in Christ. Paul is saying that Christ wiped out 'the law of the commandments and ordinances'. He is in effect telling the Jews that the thousands of rules by which they have learnt to live are unimportant. Religion based on multiple rules and regulations can by its nature never be a universal religion. Paul is making a great claim for Christ – that he is, in effect, the end of the law – the end of the need for all the laws of Judaism, but equally the end of the need for equivalent petty laws in all faiths. Jesus sought to end legalism as a principle of religion. Instead he brings love as the foundation of faith: we are to love God and to love one another.

The unity of humanity is not to be achieved by blotting out all racial and ethnic characteristics. It is now generally recognised that earlier generations of missionaries from Europe in South America or Africa sought to impose European culture, such as clothes and language, as if these were intrinsic to Christianity. But the oneness Jesus sought was a oneness in faith and love, not in culture, language or even religious practice.

Why, then, doesn't it work? How can we maintain that Christ overcomes barriers when there are so many evident barriers between groups of Christians? The people on both sides of the peace wall in Belfast are, after all, Christians. Indeed to the outside world it seems as if the very fervour of their religious values is at the root of the struggle. South Africa was and is a strongly Christian country – nearly four-fifths of its population profess Christianity, and the architects of apartheid even used religious justification for the system they created, whilst other Christians justified their

opposition to the state in terms of their faith. Many atheists and agnostics view religion as a needless cause of strife – the very antithesis of what Christ came to bring – and they are certainly not short of historical evidence to support their arguments. The seeming inevitable and growing conflict between Islamic and Christian countries at the present time – what Samuel Huntington refers to as ‘the clash of civilisations’ – seems to bear them out. How can we sustain the idea of a loving Christ who overcomes all human barriers and divisions, when the world seems to prove otherwise?

This is a very profound question which we have probably all asked ourselves at some time or another. There is no simple answer, but perhaps the way to find one is to look more closely at the sources of division in each individual case. What is at issue between Islamic countries and the Christian West is not fundamentally religion, although some social outcomes in both societies may be mutually unacceptable. But the roots of the conflict are essentially secular – cultural economic and political. Edward Said has written powerfully of the way the Christian West developed stereotypes of an alien, inferior ‘other’ in the East, which is resented. Western political behaviour is seen as inconsistent and hypocritical in its support for Israel despite its repeated flouting of international law, but going to war with Iraq, ostensibly for the same reason. Many people in the Middle East want the material benefits of Western capitalism but not the cultural domination and economic exploitation which they see as accompanying them. There are huge barriers of understanding on both sides. Recognition of this brings no quick solutions, but it is a beginning, and it is perhaps the sense that Barack Obama *does* bring this recognition that makes him a source of hope.

Current divisions within the Anglican communion can be also be linked in part to social, historical and political factors. Differences between the stances of different church leaders in Africa – the liberalism of successive Archbishops of Cape Town in contrast to the conservatism of the Nigerian primate, for example – reflect the geographical patterns of missionary activity by different elements of the church in the nineteenth century. It is hardly surprising that people who lack the economic development and cultural liberalism of the West cling more strongly to traditional teaching of the church.

Closer to home, in Northern Ireland, what we have witnessed is fundamentally an *ethnic* struggle based on two groups with different geographical origins, histories of conflict, dispossession and discrimination. Through historical accident religious affiliation is the label that distinguished them, but hardly the cause. Now and then, even at the height of the troubles, the strength of individual Christian faith brought love and forgiveness whose power was irresistible. Perhaps the problem of Northern Ireland was not, at its root, too much religion, but too little true faith and love.

Ultimately, reconciliation with God involves and demands reconciliation with our fellow human beings. Reconciliation demands mutual understanding which leads not to uniformity but to trust and acceptance of differences. True faith and Christian love does have the strength to overcome and transcend personal, ethnic and racial barriers, because it produces people who, whatever their differences, become friends who are one in their acceptance of Jesus’ message of love and peace.