

Peace through the Cross

Will Halse 18th July

How would you introduce yourself if you are meeting someone for the first time? You might just give your name, but if you'd like to go a little deeper what would you reveal about yourself. What would you like people to know about you? And what would you rather keep secret.

In a way Leena has just applied for a change to her identity – she has applied to become a British citizen. This is partly down to Brexit but Covid has also played a part. We have been unable to travel to Finland because of Covid and that has made it difficult for her to renew her Finnish passport.

This question of identity is very important in the world today. There are new crimes like identity theft. But at a deeper level we talk about gender identity, sexual identity, racial identity. This is seen as very important for minority groups because they may feel affirmed by having an identity that is widely accepted. And identity is fixed and must be protected. The world says that it is wrong to seek to change someone's identity. A person's identity is sacred and to seek to change it is a kind of abuse.

Paul is writing to the Ephesians nearly 2000 years ago but he is also addressing a question of identity. He is actually talking about a fundamental change in identity.

Paul is writing to people who are identified as Gentiles. And Paul states that as Gentiles they were atheists – by that he meant they were

people without God, ignorant of God's true nature. They were cut off from worship of the true God because they were not Jews. They did not fulfil the legal requirements. In the Jerusalem temple there was a wall dividing Jews from Gentiles. Gentiles were not permitted into inner courts of the temple. In Jewish understanding this was the place closest to God, the place where God should be worshipped.

So there are these two identities – Jew and Gentile. Jews preserve their identity through keeping the requirements of the Old Testament law – of which the most intimate and physical is circumcision. And Gentiles are excluded, outsiders. In fact they are doubly excluded. They are excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, from God's people, but also excluded from God – having no hope and without God in the world – the Greek word is atheists, not because they don't believe in God, but because they are without God. They are separate; they are different.

What is to be done?

'But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ'. Paul is talking here about what Jesus achieved on the cross – he is talking about the cross of Christ. Jesus, in giving his life on the cross, has made a way for us to come close to God. Jesus, in his death, broke down the barrier that separated Jew from Gentile, and made one single new humanity. Paul's claim is that all of humankind are transformed into one single group, to have the same identity.

Before Jesus the world is divided into two – those with God (the Jews) and those without God (everybody else). Jesus through his death on the cross has made those two groups into one. Jesus came to bring peace to all of humankind – peace with God and peace with one another. Everyone has access to God our Father by the one Spirit.

This gospel of peace has been preached to the Ephesians – Jews and Gentiles. Paul says that through Jesus they now have access to God the Father. They are saints. They are members of the household of God. They have peace with one another, and peace with the Jews. They have peace with God. God has arranged this; it is His work. Peace to those who are off. Peace to those who are near. They are being built into a temple in the Lord, a place where God lives.

And when Paul says that to the Ephesians, he says it to you and to me. It's an amazing vision; a stunning claim. Jesus, through his death on the cross brings peace and unity to all of humanity. That is the spiritual reality. That is the master plan. That is the reality then. It's the reality now.

But we only need to look at the world today to see that something has not gone to plan. We see violence and division. We see different identities, seeking a voice, looking for affirmation. Racism, oppression, even genocide. Religious minorities persecuted in many parts of the world. Deforestation, nuclear weapons and climate change. A world in confusion.

What is the solution to all these hugely complex problems? Surely the solution must be complex and difficult? The cross of Christ? Impossible.

The world is very busy constructing the complex and difficult. But Paul's claim still stands – that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace. Jesus died to bring peace; Jesus proclaims peace to you and to me, to anyone who will listen.

The question for you and me is this – what is our identity? Each of us is unique and special – short or tall, bright or not so bright, English, Welsh, Canadian, black or white. But how do we want to be identified? Are we first and foremost male or female, British or European, black or white, gay or straight? Or have we accepted this gift of the cross – are we first and foremost citizens of heaven, members of God's household, of God's family? This is what it's all about.

As we look upon the cross we see the invitation of Jesus, written in his blood. This is a free gift. There is nothing any of us can do to earn it. We come together, humbly, whatever identities we hold to, gender, sexuality, race, abilities, disabilities, even with our questions and doubts. Let us come to the foot of the cross, and open ourselves to receive the peace that Jesus gives. Peace with God, but also peace to share with our neighbour. And we know from Margaret's talk last week just who that is.

This is the reality of eternity. Jesus has brought peace through the cross. Let us receive him and be together that dwelling place for God.