

One New Church

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of January 2001. The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled One New Church and is from Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 to 22.

I am very humbled by the presence of so many people here tonight and more will be said later. Let me begin by praying. Father we pray that you would help us to have attentive minds now to understand your word and to be people who live under your rule Jesus Christ. Amen.

For people as technologically as advanced as we are, we certainly haven't learned much morally. While we can put people on the moon, we can't seem to get along together.

Heart transplants are commonplace today. I know of a person who had a heart transplant a couple of weeks ago and is doing well. But hearts of compassion are growing increasingly rarer. Instead of tearing down the walls of hostility between us, we've been erecting them with care.

Do we think these walls will help us? We must. For we certainly spend a great deal of effort building and mending them. There was a poet by the name of Robert Frost and I had to study Robert Frost when I did my HSC.

[1 : 2 8] And it was one of those things you thought when you do your HSC, why on earth am I studying this? What on earth is this material going to be useful for now? Well, Robert Frost has read his ugly head about 20 years later. He wrote a poem called Mending Walls. Has anybody heard it?

The poem is about the unending ritual of mending stone fences in a place in America, in New England I think it is. And he describes in this poem how two neighbouring farmers meet together stones that have fallen off the walls during the winter and put them back into place.

They've done this for years and years and years but it has no meaning. Since there are only pine trees on one farmer's place and one farmer's land and apple trees on the others.

The fences do absolutely nothing. But it's a tradition. And in this poem there are two forces at work. Let me read to you a couple of snippets from that poem.

And the first one is the force. The first force is saying to break down the walls. It says this. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down. Something has knocked the stones off the wall.

[2 : 3 9] There is something that wants these walls down is what the poet is saying. Well that's the first force. But there is another attitude which opposes it. Earlier in the poem one farmer addressing the other says this.

My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines I tell him. He only says good fences make good neighbours. Good fences make good neighbours. That's his reasoning.

But is this true? You must believe it because we've certainly spent a great deal of effort in our society building and repairing fences haven't we? Think of our own fences in our own yards.

The history of humankind is filled with the hostility of one person against the other or against another. And this passage that was read to us by Stephen tonight deals with the hostility between the Jew and the Gentile.

But we don't need to read a document from 2,000 years ago to be aware of racial and cultural hostility. All we have to do is go and pick up the newspaper to see what's going on and see the hostility that there is in the world today.

[3 : 47] Now there are many recent events highlighting the stark realities that walls are still standing strong and high. It seems that we've grown very adept at building walls of prejudice and hostility between ourselves and those that we say aren't like us.

Wherever and whenever there is the us and the them mentality we see the walls start to go up between people. What are the walls that are erected between you and them?

What are the walls of prejudice which separate you from others? Do you want those walls torn down? And if so how can they be torn down? Well if we look at you may like to open your Bibles at Ephesians chapter 2 page 950.

If we look at verses 11 and 12 first of all we see the nature or the natural result of sin. We see the alienation that hostility creates. Let me read it to you.

So then remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth called the uncircumcision by those who are called the circumcision a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands.

[4 : 56] Remember that you were at that time without Christ. Being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise. Having no hope without God in the world.

The hostility between Jew and Gentile, pardon me, is a well documented fact. To the Jews there were only two classes of people, Jew and Gentiles.

To be a Jew was to be one of God's chosen people. To be a Gentile was to be a heathen dog. It was worth nothing. In fact the Jews said the Gentiles were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell as one commentator writes.

The Jews looked with disdain and contempt at all Gentiles. And it might be added too that the Gentiles didn't exactly have the warm fuzzies for the Jewish people either. They both hated each other.

Now Paul calls to mind, Paul calls this to mind when he says that the Gentiles by birth were called the uncircumcision by those who were called the circumcision. Actually this was a kind of a curse thrown at the Gentiles by the Jews.

[6 : 02] You may recall that circumcision was the sign and the seal of the covenant God made with Abraham and the nation of Israel. Back in Genesis 17 verse 10 says this, God speaking to Abraham, he says, This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you.

Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Now every male would be circumcised when he was eight days old or there abouts.

And this was the symbol of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. The Gentiles, of course, were not circumcised. So when the Jews called them the uncircumcision, it was simply another way of saying that they were inferior.

After all, the Jews had been accepted by God and the Gentiles had not. This in the minds of many gave them a right to hate the Gentiles. And they could justify this hatred by pointing out many reasons for it.

The Gentiles, you see, were truly God rejecters. In fact, Paul reminds them that they were in a hopeless condition. And he describes this condition negatively in verse 12. If you have a look at it, he says there, the first thing he says, Remember that you were at that time without Christ.

[7 : 20] So they were without Christ. And then he goes on and he says, Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. So these Gentiles were without citizenship. And Paul continues on, Strangers to the covenant of Israel.

They were without covenants to assure their future. And fourthly, he concludes by saying that they were having no hope and without God in the world. The Gentiles were without hope and they were without God.

This was the Gentile situation. To the Jews, they had rejected God, which indeed they had. And the Jews had rejected them. So we see a dividing wall of hostility, in a sense, being erected here between the Jews and the Gentiles.

And Paul speaks of this barrier of the dividing wall a little bit further on in verse 14. Now this dividing wall of hostility finds its expression in a physical wall that surrounded the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

The temple in Jerusalem was a massive building with many areas for people to congregate. I was going to bring an overhead of the temple tonight or an overview, but I packed all my stuff.

[8 : 28] So you have to put up with it. In Herod's temple, there was a separating wall between the area in which a Jew was allowed and the area designated for the Gentiles.

And there were inscriptions placed along the wall which warned the Gentiles to proceed no further. And these inscriptions read in part something like this.

Anyone, that is any Gentile, who is caught doing so, proceeding further beyond their barrier, anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.

Now this dividing wall symbolised the hostility between the Jew and the Gentile. But just as Frost described in his poem, something there is that doesn't love a wall that wants it down.

Well actually, the something, as I've thought about it, is someone. Someone there is that doesn't love a wall that wants it down. And who is that someone? That someone is Christ, is Jesus Christ.

[9 : 29] He is the one that can reconcile the hostile relationships between the Jew and the Gentile, between the white and the black, between the rich and the poor, between the old and the young.

He is the someone who can break down those dividing walls of hostility. Let's look at verses 13 to 18. And here we see the supernatural result of Christ's salvation, reconciliation.

Let me read it to you. Now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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.

He, Christ that is, has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him both of us have access in one spirit to the Father.

[10 : 40] Only through Christ can the walls of prejudice come down. Christ came to break down the walls that divide us. And through Christ's work those who were once far off, the Gentiles in this instance, have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

When Christ came, he made himself the basis for peace. No longer are we to relate to God based on the law of the commandments. The principles are there for us to follow, and rightly so, that we should follow them.

But they are not the basis for our salvation. Christ abolished the Jewish law, fulfilling it perfectly by his death on the cross and subsequent resurrection.

No longer is it an exclusive group that can come to God. Now, both Jew and Gentile alike can come to him, that as verse 15 says, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.

Peace with God is not based on our heritage. It's not based on our skin colour, our performance, or anything else that we think that we might have for that matter.

[11 : 55] This passage here tells us that Jesus, he is our peace. We're also told, through him, both of us have access in one spirit to the Father.

This is what God did for the Jew and the Gentile alike. He brought them to a place of reconciliation. And it is his desire to bring all humanity to this same place.

He desires to make us into a new humanity. It's a new humanity based upon a new life in Christ. For in Christ we are made alive, as verse 5 of this chapter, chapter 2 tells us.

You see, there seems to be a tendency within us, probably inherited from Adam I suspect, not only to hide from God, but from one another as well. There is a tendency to be suspicious of one another.

There is a tendency to judge one another. There is a tendency to build walls to separate us from them. But Christ has come to bring us together in him.

[12 : 56] And in Christ there is absolutely no reason why we cannot come together. No reason that is, except our own disobedience to him. Christ has done away with arbitrary divisions.

There is now no division based upon race, nationality, age, education, sex or culture. In Christ the barriers are torn away. But let me say again, only through Christ can the walls of prejudice come down.

But in him they do and they must. Now are there things which separate you from other believers in Jesus? If there are, then perhaps it is true that you have not found a living relationship with Jesus, who is our peace.

We can be sure that the things which separate us as believers have not been placed there by God. Remember that poem, Good fences do not make good neighbours. The God of reconciliation has come to break down the walls which separate us.

Frost again in this poem says, Before I'd built a wall, I'd asked to know what I was walling in or walling out. We must be careful not to wall out the presence of Jesus, and not to wall ourselves in and find that we've built our own prison or prejudice.

[14 : 11] Jesus has come to set us free. He has come to make us one. Now there are several things that can get in the way of pulling these walls down. I want to mention three things.

The first one is pride. There is no doubt that pride is at the root of much sin. And pride is certainly at the root of prejudice I think. Some people are taught that they are intrinsically better than other people, whether it's based on race or nationality.

It can also be based on our religious denominations as well. How many times have I thought I'm a better person because I'm an Anglican? Pride. Whatever the category, when one group feels that they're better than another group, you can bet that pride is at the root.

Jesus came to break the back of pride. So pride is one fence that does need to be torn down. Another problem which gets in the way is the feeling of inferiority.

Some people have been beat up so much they feel rejected. They feel not only rejected by other people, they also feel rejected by God. It's easy to believe that since others don't like you or don't like me, therefore God doesn't like me either.

[15 : 20] And when you're victimized by a feeling of inferiority, you feel like a failure and understand in your thinking why people and why God would reject you. Other people's pride and prejudice can feed those feelings of inferiority.

But it's all a lie. Jesus accepts all who come to Him. Matthew chapter 11, Jesus says, Come to me all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

There is no sin, no failure, no fault that can cause Him to reject you. When Jesus received the woman of Samaria, for example, many were surprised that He would even talk to her.

After all, she was a Samaritan. She'd had several husbands and she was just the epitome of a person that you don't associate with. Yet Jesus is associating with her.

Many are still surprised to whom Jesus chooses. If He has chosen you, you are not a second-class citizen. You are a citizen of heaven. The third problem that people today suffer is the problem of pressure.

[16 : 25] Sometimes we build the walls because of those whom we associate who are prejudiced. Now the Apostle Peter found this to be true in his own life. In Acts chapter 10, we read of how God prepared Peter through a vision to go to a Gentile household in order to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

According to the passage, we are told in Acts 10, 28, It is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile. But God showed Peter through that vision that he had that there was nothing unclean that God could make clean.

Then he sent Peter to the house of Cornelius the Gentile. And there the Holy Spirit was poured out as the Holy Spirit had been on the day of Pentecost.

And Peter got the point. And he rejoiced at God's initiative and activity. God shows no partiality. But later on, Paul had to rebuke Peter because Peter withdrew himself from fellowship with the Gentiles when some of his Jewish mates came up from Jerusalem.

Even the Apostle Peter was a victim of the pressure which can be applied by other people's opinions. So too are we. Pressure, pressure, pressure. Pride, inferiority and pressure are all real reasons today why walls are unable to be torn down by people.

[17 : 47] Now it's true that we are a fallen world. Things look pretty glum sometimes, don't they? But there is hope beyond our fallen nature. And that is seen in Christ Jesus and the way that he changes people's lives by his Holy Spirit.

And it is supremely seen in his church where Jew and Gentile meet freely, where rich and poor connect, where black and white shake hands and make peace, where rich and poor meet, where old and young meet and connect and fellowship together.

People put aside hostility in the church to meet as God's people. And this is a message that the church so desperately needs to relearn and to re-communicate in this sick and troubled world.

Now these remaining verses of chapter 2 show how and why it is possible. First of all, it's because as God's people saved by Christ's death on the cross that we are brought into the household of God and made citizens of heaven, as verse 19 tells us.

Citizenship in heaven is, as verse 20 tells us, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. In other words, what the first Christians believed is what Christians believe today.

[19 : 05] Their gospel message, the apostles' gospel message, which was given to them by God through Jesus, is our gospel message today. It is not some other watered down version that people like to throw at us.

And I don't need to go mention names of people who do that sort of thing. Second, it is because we no longer put ourselves at the forefront of everything. Rather, Jesus is at the forefront.

The second part of verse 20 through to the end of this chapter says, Jesus himself is the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Now there is no time for me to unpack these verses here, these rich, rich verses. But let me say this. Jesus is the one who holds us all together. Jesus is the one that holds this church together.

We, the people, are the church. Sometimes it is intention. But with him as the cornerstone, with Jesus as that foundation stone which holds us all together, everything will stay in place.

[20 : 13] Friends, this is the key thing for any church and for any believer. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. With him, with him central in everything we do, we will stand blameless before God.

And with the help and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can break down those walls that do divide us. Now I have had the privilege, and let me say it, it has been a great privilege, and the joy to minister here these last three years, knowing, before I came, that Jesus is central in this church.

And what a wonderful, wonderful blessing that has been. I am so thankful to God for that. And you guys, you are very lucky and very blessed that this is central, that Jesus is central in this church.

And it has been a joy for me to see people grow in faith and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I pray, my friends, that that continues. I am thankful also to God that in my own spiritual life, these three years have strengthened my own faith and obedience in the Lord, more than you probably will ever know.

And I look forward to the next chapter that comes our way as we move to Ferntree Gully, with Jesus as the cornerstone, as he is here. I know there are going to be hardships.

[21 : 29] There is going to be also lots of joy in the process as we continue being involved in gospel ministry in Ferntree Gully. Now it is with a great deal of sadness that we move on, even tears, because you have all been, every one of you, so wonderful.

And God has been so gracious to us in sending us here. Now there will always be walls of hostility between people. That is something I am afraid that is inevitable.

But I look forward to that day, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, where we as God's people will all be able to meet praise in Him for who He is and what He has made us in His Son.

Where there will be no barriers, no dividing walls whatsoever. Where Christ will be worshipped for who He truly, truly is. Amen.