

Breaking Down the Dividing Wall

The Rev'd Barbara Dineen, 18-11-2018

Today's gospel makes for challenging reading. Especially when we have been remembering, remembering war and all that war entails. So while we can still reflect on the promise of impending destruction, and the necessity of such destruction, with an eye to Jesus foretelling his own death, I'd like us to follow a different path as we consider the purpose of buildings, notably walls.

In January 1993 I visited Berlin, not long after the infamous Berlin Wall had been knocked down. The Berlin Wall is recent enough for many of us to remember it, to see it as visible reminder of that intangible wall, first described by Winston Churchill - the Iron Curtain. Constructed in August 1961, the forty kilometre long Berlin wall was erected in the heart of a divided city, which in turn was in the middle of a divided country.

The Berlin wall symbolized the separation of East from West with its menacing parapets and threatening barbed wire and its steel roots running down into the sewers. It was a symbol of division, repression, a 'them' and 'us' mentality, and there was universal rejoicing when that wall came down on November 9, 1989.

There are walls everywhere. Jerusalem had a wall. Medieval cities like Carcassonne in France were enclosed by a wall; there's Hadrian's all, the Great Wall of China. And in our time, alas, there is the wall constructed by the Israelis to separate West Bank Palestinians from the people of Israel. And of course the Mexican wall. We know all about walls, don't we? Walls to keep in, walls to keep out, but always, walls that divide.

Or are all these walls really just one wall, what Paul calls the dividing wall of hostility. If so, it is not a physical wall, but something akin to the Iron Curtain: a metaphorical wall that separates and fragments and isolates. A wall that keeps people apart, that makes them suspicious and distrustful of each other. That kills fellowship and breeds prejudice.

Here is what one commentator says about walls: "The walls with which I have the most experience are walls made of fear, anger, misunderstanding, hatred. I build them to protect me from being hurt or being changed or being vulnerable. Walls feed on themselves. My encounters with the walls of others encourage me to build mine a little higher and little thicker. Others learn not to be trusting and vulnerable when they run into the walls which I have built

around me. Walls are part of human existence."

It seems that in every society, there is someone to be prejudiced against - and ours is no exception. The world has become so much more accessible - and people more likely to run from places where the walls of society work against them to a more welcoming context. But how do we, here in cosy little NZ, cope with this? How are we managing the society in which we live? What are the walls keeping us in, or keeping us out? For they exist; unfortunately we'll always have in our midst those who seek to nurture prejudice, for such it is, with all the zeal of the old Saul of Tarsus.

I believe one reason why St Paul was able to tackle this problem so effectively, is that he IN HIMSELF epitomises **multi**: multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-lingual. His very background was something of a stumbling block, yet at the same time his trump card: his Jewish pedigree was impeccable, as a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, he was born in Tarsus, a Roman colony, which gave him an extra layer of protection with the authorities, and as a highly educated man he was, we know, fluent in Greek as well as Latin. A tall poppy of his time - and yet over and over in his writings, we glimpse his burning desire to turn away from, to abandon these cultural and linguistic differences, while at the same time retaining the essence of who and what he was.

All around the Temple proper was a 9 foot high terrace with stairs which was higher than the Court of the Gentiles. It was surrounded by a 5 foot high wall which was designed to keep out the Gentiles. There were also pillars in the wall at various distances with inscriptions in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, warning all Gentiles to come no further under penalty of death.

This wall is certainly a physical representation of the prejudice which was a burning issue between the Jews and the Gentiles. There was no love lost between these two peoples. The utter contempt in which Gentiles were held is borne out in the discriminatory laws passed against them. Bible commentator F.F. Bruce said, "No iron curtain, no colour bar, no national distinction or frontier of today is more absolute than the cleavage between the Jew and Gentile was in antiquity." In fact, the miracle of the New Testament is the inclusion of the Gentiles into Christianity. This too came at a price - it was, after all, a cause of division between Paul and Peter and the Jewish, Gentile and early Christian communities of their day. But could we take it further? Could it be the division between God and humankind, the 'wall' that was broken down, once and for all, in the redemptive act of Christ dying for humankind? Remember, the wall in the temple was not the only physical, man-made barrier in

the Temple - the veil, beyond which only the priest could venture, was torn apart at the moment of Jesus' death.

It is Paul's unshakeable conviction that Jesus came into the world to tear down just such walls of hostility. Listen to it:

"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 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."

Here is redemption and atonement in no uncertain terms. At one with Christ - if we buy into that, it is a non-negotiable consequence that we will be at one with our neighbours. There is no place for anything other than that. If we accept that God sent his Son to live, die and rise for us, if we truly take to heart the message of Easter, we will want to embrace our neighbour. For Christ died for our neighbour too. And this is the challenge we face every day, in our community and our country. These are the birth-pangs of our God's kingdom.

Jesus came to break down the dividing walls of hostility, not just between the Jew and Gentile but between all people. God intends to create "one new humanity." As Paul says in Galatians 3:28, "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."

When Angela Merkel was elected Chancellor of Germany, she was seen by many to epitomise a new era for a country reunified after years of hatred and mistrust. She has bridged gaps, broken down barriers, visible and metaphorical; yet she remains intrinsically the person created in the image of God that she always was. Becoming one in Christ, one with Christ, means no more, no less than that for each of that. We are each of us unique, we were created to and for love by a God of love, and redeemed by God's love. We are all one in Christ Jesus. God loves us all. Colour, race, age and income and the rest, all those things we turn into walled off corners of our minds, have no place in our union with Christ. Indeed, our call is to tear them down. Or, as Robert Frost put it:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.