

Breaking down and Building up

Ephesians 2.11-22

There are two themes in today's reading from Ephesians, which are particularly appropriate on a day when we have a baptism. They could be summed up as 'Breaking down and Building up.'

Let's take the 'breaking down' part. We live in a horribly divided world. What came to my mind immediately was Tom Lehrer's song 'National Brotherhood Week'. Just let me quote a couple of verses – not the one which might get me arrested. They go:

Oh, the white folks hate the black folks
And the black folks hate the white folks
To hate all but the right folks
Is an old established rule
Oh, the poor folks hate the rich folks
And the rich folks hate the poor folks
All of my folks hate all of your folks
It's American as apple pie.

But not just those – think of all those other divisions we see in the news day after day – left wing and right wing, old and young, straight and gay, government and opposition, Arab and Jew, state educated and privately educated – we could go on and on. Us and Them seems to be part of the way we function, or fail to function as a society.

In the reading the writer takes the one that is uppermost in his mind – the division between Jew and Gentile. That was a burning issue for the first generations of Christians. As time went on, hostility between Christians and Jews was growing. And within the Christian community there were arguments about how Gentile believers could be said to be part of the New Israel. That isn't the issue for us. But the principle which the letter offers as a solution to the division is as relevant today as ever it was. The answer is that Christ has ended that hostility. As it says 'He has made both groups one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us.' The message is to those who are far off – the Gentiles – and those who are near (the Jews.). We have had physical examples of this in our day. I recall travelling through Checkpoint Charlie in the Berlin Wall – and feeling I was in another world: us and them. When that wall came down, it was a moment of immense joy. Sadly there are walls in the Holy Land. When I went there on pilgrimage in the 1980s, travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem was straightforward. Now you have to pass through a dividing wall. This letter is hammering home the fact that whatever our background, wherever we come from, we have equal access to God. We will sing about it later in John Oxenham's great words:

In Christ there is no east or west.
In him no south or north,
but one great family of love
throughout the whole wide world.

When we are baptised, we are part of a family that knows no boundaries. We are baptised not into a local church, or into a denomination, but into the worldwide church, the company of believers, the family of Christ, which encompasses everyone.

Let's move on the 'building up' part. In this passage we hear a picture of the church which is also to be found in the first letter of Peter. It is the image of the church, that worldwide fellowship, as a building. We actually have two rather conflicting images, both of them entirely valid. One is Christ as the foundation stone. I am all too aware of the importance of a good foundation, having lived in a new house which didn't have one, and so had to be demolished and rebuilt on a good one. The other image is Christ as the cornerstone. Hebrew and Greek scholars argue a bit about exactly what that means in the Biblical text. But generally they agree that is probably the coping stone – the stone that completes a building, or the keystone like the one which holds the two sides of a bridge together. It is a visual way of talking about Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet – the beginning and the end. And two of our hymns today use that imagery.

So when we are baptised, we are as it were a stone within that building. Abbe Michel Quoist wrote a memorable prayer called The Brick:

The bricklayer laid a brick on the bed of cement.

Then with a precise stroke of his trowel spread another layer

And without a by-your-leave, laid on another brick.

The foundations grew visibly,

The building rose, tall and strong, to shelter men.

I thought Lord, of that brick buried in the darkness at the base of the big building.

No-one sees it, but it accomplishes its task, and the other bricks need it.

Lord, what difference, whether I am on the rooftop or in the foundations of your building, as long as I stand faithfully at the right place?

Everyone who is baptised is a brick in the great building Christ's church. We all have a part to play. Then I remembered another book I read years ago, which was called 'Building with Bananas'. Apparently 'banana' is the word bricklayers use for bricks which are not quite properly shaped. All of us could reasonably say that we are a bit banana-shaped bricks. We are not perfect. The received wisdom from bricklayers is that they can't build with banana bricks. The received wisdom of the church is that God can and does build with the banana bricks that we are. Despite any shortcomings, and faults, we still have a calling to be useful bricks in God's building. As our reading ended – we are 'also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.' That is our calling as people who are baptised. Any things which divide us have been knocked down by Christ, and now we are built up to love him and serve him in his world.