

**Sheffield United Reformed Churches**  
**Team Ministry worship for individuals or a family**  
**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021 at 10:30 am.**

**Call to worship**

He is our peace, who has broken down every wall  
Cast all your cares on him, for he cares for you!

**Hymn MP 790**

You are the King of Glory - You are the Prince of Peace  
You are the Lord of Heaven and Earth - You're the Son of Righteousness

Angels bow down before You, worship and adore,  
For You have the words of eternal life  
You are Jesus Christ, the Lord!

“Hosanna!” to the Son of David - “Hosanna!” to the King of Kings  
Glory in the highest Heavens! For Jesus, the Messiah Reigns

**Opening Prayer of Worship**

Blessed are you, Lord, our Father, King of the universe, who is good and creates and gives every good gift to your children.

Blessed are you, Lord, our Father, King of the universe, who has allowed us to live, has preserved us, and has enabled us to reach this time.

Blessed are you, Lord, our Father, King of the universe, who has promised your Kingdom to David and his descendants for ever, even to Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, crucified and risen to life, ascended to reign with you through the Holy Spirit

Lord, our Father and Saviour, as we bless you so may your blessing come to us, King of Glory and Prince of Peace. For Christ himself is our peace, uniting your people, destroying the barriers of failure and sin that divide from you and one another by his living out in his life of the holy laws of God and so reconciling us to God through the cross. You came and preached peace to all, both near and far away that we might live in peace as one body, as in Christ Jesus we are brought near to you by his blood and as we all have access to the Father, by one Spirit.

Now, as we are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with all God's people and members of his family, build our lives by your grace and strength on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Help us lean, depend and rest on Christ Jesus who is our foundation and chief cornerstone. Build us together, in him, so that your Church, gathered here, might be joined in unity and rise to become a holy temple where the very presence of God may come and dwell by his Spirit.

**Readings**



**2 Samuel 7: 1-14a** – God's makes a covenant promise to establish David's line and provide a place for Israel...

**Psalms 89** – David's line will be established even though many of them will fail...

**Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56** – Jesus shares the gracious power of God with the people. They are like sheep without a Shepherd...

**Ephesians 2: 11-22** – Everyone is invited to share in the covenants and become citizens of Israel.

## Reflection

The photograph above shows suitcases left behind by Jewish Polish concentration camp “inmates” during the Holocaust - “inmates” in inverted commas because they were probably executed on arrival at the camp. It is strange that the picture has been taken down from the *Facebook* pages of several of my friends, as it is in breach of *Facebook’s* community guidelines - no explanation is offered as to what these “community guidelines” might be, nor how a photograph remembering a group of people, who suffered such hatred, breaches these guidelines.

So the world continues to be riven with division and misunderstanding. Those whose faces, cause, culture or skin colour don’t fit the latest fashionable political narrative continue to be marginalised and forgotten. Paul’s amazing discourse in his letter to the Ephesians faces this problem head on.

Perhaps, before we get to it, we need a reminder of what is happening today. One of the fiercest contemporary debates within the Church (and wider society) concerns what many see as the pernicious influence of “Europe-centred”, “patriarchal” and “heteronormative” theologies throughout church history. It is argued that a Europe-centred theology has been instrumental in underpinning colonialism (and thus racism) against non-whites; patriarchal theology has justified the subjugation of women and heteronormative theology has contributed to the marginalisation of gay people. In contrast to these poisonous perversions of the Gospel, new and fresh theologies have arisen to counter their long-entrenched oppression: black theology, feminist theology and queer theology among many others.

But Paul weighed in long ago with his own theology and it takes us in a surprising direction. It is certainly a corrective to Euro-centric theology but it may not be one we welcome or like very much. This is true whether we stand in agreement or dissent from Euro-centric theology, because Paul takes us right back to a very un-European place: God’s ancient covenant with Israel. In doing so, Paul reminds us that our Gospel is rooted in a place very unlike ours.

There is a paradoxical sense in which Paul’s thinking unites us all, whether white, black, male, female, straight or gay, by placing us all firmly OUTSIDE. “...remember that once you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised”...remember that you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to God’s covenants, without hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2, 11-12). Ouch and double ouch!!

Whatever our identity, we are united in our status as aliens (unless we are Jewish!) So, is this a hopeful basis for unity? I think not: those who are united in being marginalised tend to act out of envy and hatred - as the pile of suitcases and the death of six million Jews in the death camps attest.

But, thank the God of Abraham that Paul doesn’t let it rest there. There is a much more positive basis for unity (one that, sadly, our Church seems to have under-stressed in our headlong rush to mimic the ideologies of this age) - Paul has a glorious “But now” in counterpoint to the “once you”: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2, 13).

What is the basis of our unity that brings an end to division? Christ is the source of peace. In fact he IS our peace (v14). He has made two groups, seemingly insurmountably divided, into one new family, body and nation and reconciled both of them to God through the cross (vv 14-19). Through Christ, all have access to the Father (v18). His holy life, by which he lived out the Laws of God has destroyed the biggest barrier between us and God, that dividing wall of hostility between sin and righteousness. In fact, he killed that hostility stone dead (vv 15-16).

This great saving act, through the cross, is the basis of ending all hostility between people, whether of race, nationality, gender, age or class or any other false division. But we need to recognize that this reconciliation is built, first and foremost, on the foundation of a profound healing between people who formerly belonged to God, through his sovereign choice, and those who never did. Jesus came and preached peace to us “who were far away” - Gentiles - and peace to those “who were near” - Jews (v.17).

Do you ever wonder what God is up to in the world? Here Paul gives us a whopping clue: “His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.” (v15). Reconciling Jews and Gentiles is top of God’s agenda. But God seems to go further. We don’t just live at peace with his people, we are actively invited to come inside and join the party. We join the Jews, we do not replace them in God’s affections: “...You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens (of Israel) with God’s people (the Jews)...members of his household. (This) building...is joined together and rises to become a holy temple...you too (ie: with the Jews), together...become a dwelling in which God lives...” (vv 19-22). Wow!

Unless we want to reject this idea altogether, it is the only honest way to understand what Paul was saying to his Gentile hearers. But can we reject it without throwing out everything else that has come down to us through the Gospel? And who, then, is to judge what we throw away and what we keep, and by what standard? But this raises very difficult questions. Not least, for those who pride themselves on their quest for unity and justice but stumble when it comes to loving Jews. Anti-semitism seems well down the league table of politically popular “isms”

But it also raises other difficult questions about the Jews in general and Israel in particular - has God rejected them for ever? Paul certainly thinks not (see Romans, Chapters 9-11). His letters, outlining the idea of God’s continuing love for Israel, may have been written after the time the Roman destruction of Israel as a nation might have suggested the definite end of his Covenant relationship with them. They were certainly written after the Jews had rejected the New Covenant offered by Jesus. But, in Romans and Ephesians, Paul underlines the faithfulness of God to his people. To entertain the idea that God has stopped loving a particular group is a very dangerous notion indeed. It implies that God, who IS love, can stop loving and keeping his heart open. And remember, historically, the very notion that God had rejected his people opened the door to both anti-semitic violence and the very Euro-centric theologies that are so problematic. But remembering that we, as Gentiles, were once, in fact the outsiders and only enter by grace, brings the possibility of humility.

But did God chose Israel to begin with?! Well, if God wanted to reveal his loving purpose and holiness through a community he had to choose someone! If he had chosen the Swedes would a man called Jonasson be worshipped today and would there be fighting over Stockholm rather than Jerusalem?!! Paul, in Romans 9-11 stresses the sovereign choice of God in this matter and warns, sternly, against disputing it. All the heritage of our Biblical faith testifies to these facts as our Old Testament readings (2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89) and, in fact, the whole Old Testament narrates - those prophets who form a foundation stone of the faith of the Church. They also foretell many events in history that make no sense unless Israel continues to survive to see their fulfilment. So do we jettison their witness as well? Are we, also, to totally deconstruct Jesus’ and his Apostle’s understanding of himself as Messiah and Son of David? Could a culture sold out to the idea that each of us is entitled to say “I am who I am” allow Jesus to be who he thinks HE IS and the God of Abraham to say “I am who I am” also? (Exodus 3, vv 14-15).

One prophet famously asked “Can a nation be born in a day?” (Isaiah 66, v8). On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948 this came to pass when the modern state of Israel, with the recognition of the United Nations and underpinned by the legal framework of the 1921 San Remo conference, came into being. But, tragically, Israel doesn’t behave like the people God has chosen. Their record on human rights is appalling. On the other hand, they have needed continual vigilance against nations committed to their destruction. It’s a tragic human story at the centre of history. But Israel’s story in the Bible has never been a story of success but abject failure!! And the central point of Paul’s thinking is that Israel is also chosen by grace. We cannot give unqualified approval of Israel because of their goodness. That they exist at all as a nation is on the basis of God’s gracious choice. As we are saved by grace, so are they. Do we want to know what God is up to in these momentous times? Then consider Israel. Watch Israel. Be a critical friend of Israel. Pray for Israel. Bless Israel and be blessed, thereby.

### **Hymn - R&S 121**

The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above;  
Ancient of Everlasting Days, and God of Love;  
Jehovah, great I AM! By earth and heaven confessed;  
I bow and bless the sacred name, forever blest.

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Father, we pray for ourselves:

Sustain us in the complexity of our humanity as you sustained David throughout his life --  
Fighting off lions and playing the songs of youth,  
Throwing stones at giant problems and loving our friends beyond wisdom,  
dancing in worship, mourning the waywardness of our children,  
Failing, ourselves and being raised by grace  
breaking our hearts in psalms, and longing for warmth in our old bones.  
Being promised hope of life beyond our own, through the promises of a faithful God  
And the resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, David's Son, the Messiah.

Christ, we pray for your people,

Citizens of Israel, benefactors of your unbreakable covenant love, members of your body, the Church

Help us enter into your purposes as we proclaim and live your reconciliation of all things through the cross.

You invite us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers, as parts of our very own body, as dear to us as our own needs. ... *Names those in your hearts and minds here...*

You command us to love ourselves, as we are drawn and accepted in your great and tender love, that we might so love our neighbors as ourselves

We offer our thanksgivings and our prayers for unity, wisdom and grace on behalf of your Church. As we grow, a holy temple in Christ, come and live among us by your Holy Spirit that the world may see the reign of Jesus among us.

Holy Spirit, we pray for the world in which you are at work...

For peace, justice and security in the land of Israel and in all places of conflict and division  
For an end to corrupt and selfish rule

For a determination to bring justice and abundant life for all who face poverty and injustice

For wisdom in these difficult days of decision in the face of continuing pandemic

For strength for those serving in the health services, research and vaccination programmes

For those whose lives and homes are devastated by fire, natural disaster and catastrophe

For courage in the face of insurmountable problems posed by environmental decay, irreconcilable difference, want and overpopulation

Hear our prayers, God of power, and through the work of your Son, free us from the grip of the tomb, that we may desire you as the fullness of life and proclaim your saving deeds to all the world. We bring all our prayers in the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples... **Our Father**

## **Closing Hymn – R&S 647**

In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north,  
but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.  
In Christ shall true hearts everywhere, their high communion find.  
His service is the golden cord close binding humankind.

Join hands, then, people of the faith, whate'er your race may be.

All children of the living God are surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both east and west, in him meet south and north.

All Christly souls are joined as one throughout the whole wide earth.

## **Blessing**

We are the Temple of the Living God, built on Christ, the chief corner-stone

The Father lives among us by the Holy Spirit

As Christ, who is our peace, breaks down every wall of division.

So may God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unite bless and care for us all  
Today and always - Amen