

Reflection – “For he is our peace”

July 18, 2021

Paul is not messing around here. He is full of joy for the way the folks in Ephesus have given themselves to following Jesus (see chapter 1:15-ff) but he never lets them forget their past. “You were dead through the trespasses in which you once lived...” (2:1).

Now - it pays to be cautious when Paul starts using ‘us and them’ language. Binary thinking has done nothing for the state of the world where human relationships are concerned, and religious institutions have a very chequered history with the notion that ‘if you’re not like us, you need to be like us.’ Make disciples, said Jesus – but we made enemies instead, thanks to the attraction of binary thinking.

Paul is speaking from personal experience when he decides that life committed to Jesus is better than a life without Jesus. That’s perfectly acceptable and many of us could make the same claim. Paul is likely very sincere in wanting those ‘outside the family of God’ to be joined to the fold – again, based on his experience, he wants everyone to have the same wonderful experience that he has enjoyed. But we have turned Paul’s enthusiasm into ‘our way is the best way,’ and that has made a mess of everything.

Paul does spend a lot of time pointing out differences. And he names them in stark terms; death and life – circumcised and uncircumcised. Paul offered these as the boundaries between the ‘family of God’ and everyone else. But in our enthusiasm to define ourselves – in our eagerness to hear that we are somehow unique or extraordinary – we don’t often hear the point Paul makes about those differences.

How many different ways does Paul (the king of exceptions) say something like ‘there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...?’ He goes on a riff about different gifts, or body parts, and always – ALWAYS – ends with a version of ‘but ALL are ONE in Christ Jesus.’

Good old Paul.

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He gets a lot of guff (from me) about some of his arguments. Women are not particularly well served by some of Paul’s ideas. But he has provided much of what we call the New Testament.

His efforts to figure out what it meant to live as a disciple of the Risen Christ are what started this little Sunday morning social experiment. And in this morning’s excerpt from Ephesians, he makes what I think might be his best argument.

Paul has lived with uncertainty. He knows the long and faithful history of his own religious tradition – a tradition that found itself faced with the challenge of these new ideas and attitudes that developed among Jesus’ friends, students and followers. Division was inevitable (the gospels suggest that even Jesus knew that.) And yet, even here Paul reminds us that division is not God’s desire. Division is not Jesus’ mission.

“In his flesh he has made both groups into one, and has broken down the dividing wall...”

Into a world that was (2000 years ago) divided by economics, politics, religion, gender and heaven knows what else, Jesus brought new definitions. To those (self-declared) ‘chosen people’ he offered a more generous understanding of who it is that God loves. He ignored long established social/cultural boundaries in life, and by his death and resurrection, wiped out the common boundary of mortality. No more would it matter who controlled access (or had influence) over the everlasting – the everlasting had come to us; Jesus is the focal point of God’s relationship with Creation (so says Paul and 2000 years of Christian thought.) Unity for everyone, right? RIGHT???

Well, that’s the ideal. That is what Paul was arguing for – even while experiencing something else...conflict between and among believers; rival factions within the body of Christ; “I follow Paul; I follow Appollos; I’m on team Jesus.” This unity project has been in trouble from the beginning, and even now, Paul pleads for us to see and appreciate the simple beauty of Jesus’ offer:

“So, he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.”

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This peace has been the centrepiece of ideas about Jesus. Believers have sought peace – sung about peace – prayed for peace for two thousand years. And still the squabbling, the in-fighting, not to mention war and rumours of war...Jesus’ proclamation of peace is one thing; knowing peace – living peace, is another thing altogether.

But Paul tries to help us. In spite of the difficulties he is having, Paul documents his own journey from chaos to peace. He has found the answer, even in the midst of trouble. The answer is not a particular lesson, or miracle of Jesus; not a sermon or a single episode from Jesus’ life. The answer is Jesus. Jesus is our peace. Jesus is the one who breaks down boundaries between the ‘us and them’ factions. Jesus is the common human who connects us to the compassion and grace of God.

While we, in our imagined sophistication, argue about useless points of doctrine – who can marry whom; who can be ordained; what constitutes ‘holy scripture’; what is a sacrament – Jesus stands ready, as the one ready to unite our conflicted positions, pointing to God, inviting us to meaningful relationships.

When competition is turned into mutual concern, or when contention gives way to compassion, peace is the result. One person at a time - one relationship at a time. And Jesus is at the centre of those transformed relationships.

No matter what we think of Paul’s approach, we might acknowledge that his argument has merit. Jesus invites our attention – Jesus motivates our action – Jesus guides our responses – or at least, that’s the ideal. Jesus offers us the chance to alter our focus – to change our perspective. Jesus doesn’t call us to solve complicated theological puzzles (as much fun as that can be for some of us) – Jesus calls us to journey together; to bear one another’s burdens; to be good neighbours and to live in harmony.

Our peace. The solution won’t be found in programs or rules or hyper-righteousness or even fervent prayer. Our peace is waiting for us in Jesus. In our shared experiences. In the bread and wine. In laughter and tears and the stories we tell that are full of expressions of our shared humanity.

Peace calls to us. Peace waits for us.