

19th July 2015

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **25** **“God is here! As we his people”**
 690 **“The Church’s one foundation”**
 409 **“Let us build a house where love can dwell”**
 608 **“All praise to our redeeming Lord”**

READINGS: Mark 6:30-34 & 53-56
Ephesians 2: 11-22

“NO LONGER STRANGERS AND ALIENS”

Those who were here last week and the observant among those may have noticed that we have had the same reading from Ephesians this week as last week. This is not a mistake. This reading resonates in so many ways with our lives today and so is a veritable mine for sermons.

Last week Leslie focussed on the metaphor of a building contained in this passage in his sermon ‘Built to last’. We, the Church are built on foundations laid by the prophets and the apostles. If our building – our community of faith- is to be strong and lasting, Jesus Christ needs to be the cornerstone – the stone that links the building together. And then whatever we build on this foundation has to be built in such a way that there are no interior walls separating people from one another, no barriers to full fellowship among all the people of God.

It is this last emphasis I wish us to think about and expend upon this morning.

The apostle Paul who wrote in this passage to the Christians at Ephesus was pre-occupied with a serious problem in the early church.

Jesus was a Jew. The disciples were all Jews. Paul himself was a Jew. Over the centuries the Jews had kept themselves separate from non-Jews. They knew themselves to be God’s chosen people – worshippers of the one true God – in a world where people worshipped a whole range of gods and idols.

A pre-occupation of the Jews was keeping themselves pure – separate – away from the contamination of being influenced by what they regarded as ‘godless others.’ To achieve this purity they developed a whole code of laws and regulations especially ones dealing with food. In all of this insistence of separation and purity the Jews often forgot that God had given them a mission not just among their fellow Jews but to other people – to be a light to lighten the gentiles.

Yet Paul, after his dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road, saw himself primarily as an apostle to the gentiles and so he immediately became enmeshed in the controversy over whether such gentile followers of the Jesus way had to effectively follow Jewish practices before they could become full members of the early church communities.

Today's passage from Ephesians is Paul's most mature answer on the debate about the position of gentiles in what, to that time, had been a Jewish movement. Paul uses two very important words in this passage – aliens and strangers. So he says to the gentile Ephesians, 'remember that you were at one time without Christ, being aliens from the people of Israel, the Jews, and you were also strangers to the promises of God, having no hope and without God in this world.'

In other words gentiles, even if they were god-fearers and wanted to come close to the God of the Jews – were prevented from doing so by the rules and regulations of the Jews. There was no way that they could come close because they were regarded as 'other' not people with whom the Jews could have a relationship, always separate and strange.

Now, of course, the Jews of 1st century are by no means the only people who, over the ages have regarded other groups of people as 'strangers and aliens.' Over and over again groups of people – national or language groups make other people into 'aliens' or something 'other' over and against themselves. When this happens it is often one big factor that has allowed terrible things to be done to those people who are regarded as 'strangers', 'others' 'not us' and therefore dangerous to us.

We know only too well that in the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s it was the Jews themselves who were stigmatised and stereotyped as dangerous 'others' and as aliens even though most of them had lived in Germany for generations. The problems of Germany in the post-World War One era were laid at the door of the Jews and they were exterminated mercilessly.

In Rwanda in the 1990s Hutus and Tutsis who had lived side by side and who had inter-married over generations were set against each other by propaganda over the radio and a horrific genocide ensued in 1994.

There has just been a commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica. In the break-up of the Yugoslavia, the constituent groups of the region were set against each other and, as in Rwanda, killed people who had been their neighbours, with whom they had been living at peace.

In all of these instances and so many more terrible things were able to happen because people had been set apart from others. 'Others' had been made into aliens and strangers and through that these terrible acts were committed.

Well, you may say to me, that was then, that was there – it is not like here and now. Well, all I would say is that we need to be on our guard.

There is a migration crisis in Europe or at least from the viewpoint of many in Europe that is how it is termed. Perhaps we should try to look at the picture from the perspective of the others involved – the migrants. For many of them there is a governance crisis in their country, there is a crisis of violence; people do not feel safe in the country of their birth.

And the result of war, intimidation and violence in other parts of the world is that people seek a home in somewhere safe where they can hope for themselves and

their children and look forward to the future. We see this crisis daily at the port of Calais and in the islands of southern Europe where migrants land or are rescued from leaky, unsafe boats ... od die at sea ... die at sea – women and children as well as men, dying in huge numbers. There were 3500 known deaths in the Mediterranean Sea in 2014 and thousands this year already.

If such numbers of people had died as the result of an earthquake or a tornado there would have been an outpouring of humanitarian concern, But these people dying in the Mediterranean Sea are refugees and asylum-seekers and the response to their plight has not always been positive. These people are considered aliens and strangers and the discourse is ‘ how can we stop them coming to the shores of Europe?’

The Italians have borne the brunt of the costs of responding to these migrants – 800 million Euros on rescue operations and camps on the island of Lampedusa. The rest of the EU has been reluctant in sharing the costs and even more reluctant to take their share of people for settlement. High security fences are now being erected at Calais; people are dying on the railway track as they try to board trains to Britain.

I am not naïve – neither this country nor any other country can take an endless stream of migrants (though we should not overlook the fact that countries neighbouring Syria have taken in the vast majority of those fleeing from the violence).

However the fact that we cannot take all does not have to mean that we wash our hands of the issue and turn a blind eye to people dying in the Mediterranean Sea or on the Eurostar tracks. We can turn a blind eye if we think of these people as ‘alien and ‘other’ but these people are only strangers and aliens if we choose to make them such. They are individuals and families with names, each with their own stories just like us and just like us, each unique and precious to God.

A stranger is a friend we have not yet met and got to know. If we met these people as individuals and not as statistics, we would find that we were meeting friends.

Faced with the scale of the crisis it is very tempting to throw up our hands in despair and fail to do anything. But a group of Christians in Italy have faced this challenge and decided to do something. The Federation of Protestant Churches is actively engaged in a new programme called Mediterranean Hope. This programme has several aspects or strands to it

- An observatory on the island of Lampedusa monitoring what is happening.
- A reception centre in Sicily
- An office, based in Rome, for the relocation of refugees and asylum-seekers.
- Exploration of the possibility of humanitarian visas and the opportunity to seek asylum from outside the borders of the EU and to travel by conventional means not in leaky boats for extortionate prices. A current experiment is underway based in Morocco.

These Italian Christians are not under any illusions that they can solve a problem on their own – it is a global problem. Yet they see these fleeing people not as dangerous

people or aliens but as individuals, human beings like themselves, like us –people precious in the eyes of God.

Paul, in our passage from Ephesians was primarily addressing a problem of the church. He was not laying down guidelines for political and economic issues for all time. Paul was insisting that, in Christ, a new humanity has been created in which every person has access in one Spirit to the Father.

He could say to the alienated gentile Christians of Ephesus – ‘you are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. ‘Becoming a citizen of a new country’ is that not the hope of every displaced person, refugee and asylum-seeker.

This ancient text provides a desperately needed Gospel for a radically divided world. Christ’s death was not just about forgiveness, it was also about the recreation of the whole human race, all who live upon on the earth.

It all starts with us – here as a community of faith in this place. We have to ensure that for the sake of Amiaya –Love and all our children, that there are no ‘outsiders’ in our church, no second class citizens, no people who might be labelled ‘tourists’ who visit but do not feel that they belong. Here there should never be any resident aliens! If we can achieve this through our hospitality and welcome in this church, it should give us encouragement and inspiration to go out into the world of our daily lives and refuse to accept that any other person is a stranger or an alien.

The grace of God in Christ destroys and breaks down the divisions and hostilities of humanity in order to build a new humanity that becomes God’s house in the world. We are children of grace.

Remember Paul could just as easily having been speaking to us when he addressed the Ephesians – for we are all gentiles, as far as I know. We were aliens and strangers – just as much as the gentiles of the Mediterranean world and we have been brought near by the blood of Christ just as they were. We are no longer strangers and aliens but citizens of the household of God, a citizenship which requires no visa.

If we have been brought into the household of God how can we deny that to others?
Amen