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One in Christ (Ephesians 2.11-22)

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When I was in my mid-thirties, having been about 10 years away from the church, I found myself being drawn back to the Christian tradition. To my own surprise, I was tentatively discovering life and depth in words and symbols I thought had gone dead for me. After a couple of years of this gradual awakening to the possibility of faith, something even more surprising happened. Though still unsure about seemingly basic questions – like how to use the word ‘God’ and the meaning of Christ – I found myself thinking about ordination and wondering about a call to the priesthood. It was strange and yet compelling. So, no doubt in a fairly inchoate and unconvincing way, I dared to share what I was sensing with a friend whose version of Christianity was much more certain than mine. Her response was not encouraging. But Sarah, she said sceptically, ‘Do you think you’re really saved?’

This Lent, we are exploring the theme of atonement. We’re reflecting on the nature of Christ’s ‘saving’ work, seeking to attend to the different ways our tradition has expressed its faith that the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth decisively changed the human landscape, and thus the prospects of the whole creation. We’re trying to understand more of what this might mean and how it makes a difference for us.

‘Do you think you’re really saved?’ I don’t know exactly what my friend meant by this. But it seemed to reflect two assumptions that pervade strands of Western Christianity, Western Protestantism, in particular. One is the focus on the individual. The second is the focus on one’s eternal destiny. Are you ‘saved’ can mean, ‘are you in’? Are you sufficiently committed and believing, have you received sufficiently obvious gifts of the Spirit, such that you feel yourself secure from the threat of damnation, rescued from the punishment to which your sinful humanity would otherwise doom you? Well, this is a thought world I’ve always struggled with. But the

passage we just heard suggests a rather different vision of the meaning of salvation and its felt sense. It seems much more about the possibilities of life on earth than our destination in the hereafter; much more about the character of our shared life, than our individual spiritual assurance. So let's take a closer look.

Though the letter to the Ephesians is traditionally attributed to St Paul, some recent scholarship suggests it's not directly from his pen. But whether or not Paul wrote it,¹ it certainly assumes the Pauline notion of justifying grace. As I tried to bring out last week, the essential insight here is that the whole point of faith is to become more fully human, more generously ourselves, more resonant with the harmonic of love. The breakthrough for Paul and the first disciples lay in their realising that this had become possible for them, not because of their good works or their successful keeping of God's law, but simply because through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus they experienced in a whole new way that God knew them and was 'for' them. In Paul's terms, they were 'justified', aligned, made whole, not because they got it right, not as a reward for good behaviour, but because they were loved; by sheer gift – grace. To be justified all they needed to do was to accept the gift, to let go the deeply and humanly ingrained habit of seeking a righteousness of their own. Rather than trying to justify themselves or lay claim to God's favour by means of their moral success, they had simply to be willing to open themselves – warts and all – to God's transfiguring action.

This was a radical shift in sensibility and it led to reams of convoluted reflection on the status of the Law and law-keeping in new Christian communities. On the one hand, the New Testament letters want to honour the Law of ancient Israel. It was received originally as a gift from God to form and guide people in God's ways. It taught justice and compassion for the widow and orphan, and in itself consistently warned against legal-*ism* and self-righteousness. Yet this warning was not always heeded. The perennial danger was that those who succeeded in keeping the law's requirements felt self-satisfied, 'justified' on the basis of their good works.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.xiii.

Even more dangerously, law-keeping all too often becomes the means of distinguishing yourself from all those who fail to measure up. Thus, *within Israel*, the righteous may feel themselves smugly better than the unrighteous. Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable who prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector' (Luke 18. 11). Even more, between righteous Jew and lawless Gentile, this sense of moral differentiation and superiority becomes an insuperable barrier, 'a dividing wall' which makes genuine mutuality unimaginable.

This is the reality with which our reading begins. 'So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles (you non-Jews) by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" ... remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world' (Eph. 2.11-12). Now we're liable to bristle at the letter's implication that, outside the faith of Israel, outside the Law, the rest of the world's population was 'without God'. It sounds uncomfortably close to colonial assumptions that Christianity brought God to places like Australia and North America ... as if God were not already here. But I think the primary point being made in Ephesians is that what had been lacking was a 'commonwealth' – a sense (on either Jewish or Gentile side) that they *shared* life (or God) and therefore had a common destiny.

Remember, there was *nothing* in Paul's world that corresponds to the idea of universal human rights.² What was possible for a person in the ancient world was profoundly affected by the social group to which they belonged, whether they were deemed an 'insider' or an 'outsider' in any particular context. Categories like citizen or alien, says Rowan Williams, 'mattered intensely to Paul's contemporaries. They were literally matters of life and death, determining where your security lay, the rights you could claim, the advantages you believed you had'.³ So in this context,

² Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, p.5.

³ Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, p.17.

imagine the shock brought by Paul's insistence. 'There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.28).

For Paul, there is something about the experience of justifying grace, something about the unconditional welcome of God, which breaks open the categories that formerly had defined people's identities and thus their relationship with every other category of person. One of these categories, from a Jewish perspective, was the Law. Yet Paul writes: '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' (Eph. 2.15). As Williams puts it, Paul is saying that 'belonging to God's people is being neither a Jew nor a Gentile; it's a third reality beyond the rival identities of different sorts of insider – the insideness of the Jew confident in God's choice of Israel, the insideness of the Roman citizen. There is something potentially larger than both these kinds of belonging, a new belonging simply as a human being invited by God into intimacy with the eternal'.⁴ Listen again: 'So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God' (Eph. 2.19).

Notice that this new life enabled by 'justifying grace' is here not focused on my personal rescue from the threat of hell, but on a reconfiguration of the whole human landscape. Salvation, justification is connected to the possibility of a radically new sense of mutual belonging and care, the breaking down of every barrier between different kinds and conditions of people. This is why the early church understood itself to be by definition 'universal'. It's not (despite some of its later history) because the church is a colonising institution with aspirations to rule the world; it's because the true church is a body of grace from which in principle no one may be excluded.

⁴ Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, p.32.

Two final points. One, this universality was not premised on belief in some pre-existing natural harmony. It was a universality made possible by breaking down the 'natural' rivalry tending to hostility between human groups; it was a universality made possible by coming to recognise 'foreigners' as well as oneself as the object of a loving regard, as recipients of Christ's welcome, fellow participants in a divinely initiated project. It's not that these historically rival groups suddenly decide to work together for some mutually agreed outcome; it's that they find themselves caught up in something much larger than they are, being 'built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God' (Eph. 2.22), and so becoming a new creation.

And, two, this divinely initiated project has as its 'cornerstone' Christ. Says Ephesians, 'But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace'; he has reconciled 'both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it' (Eph. 2.14, 16). Which brings us to the nub of the question of atonement. How is it that the cross, the blood, the death of Christ is the means, perhaps the necessary means, by which the peace of God becomes available in our midst and the love of God fully shareable? That is the question to which we turn directly next week.