

Talk on Eph. 2:11-22 by Daniel Odhiambo on 18.07.21

It is an unnegotiable fact that we are made for relationships. Some are better than others, but we all agree we need each other.

And you don't need to be a Christian to think like that, the idea of getting along with each other is pervasive in our world.

So we long for a united Europe, hence we have the European Union. And when one of the countries decides to leave, we feel betrayed. In fact we decide we don't want them to win Euro 2020. Did you feel like it was the world vs England last week?

And after the war, we longed for a united world, and so we formed the United Nations.

Or even think of nations with the word united in their name: United Kingdom, United States of America, United Arab Emirates etc

Or football teams: Manchester United, and I don't know how that works because we have Manchester City.

The world definitely thinks getting along with each other is an important thing.

I wonder if you have noticed just how much talk there is about tolerance and inclusivity nowadays.

I'm sure you have an inclusivity policy somewhere at work and several workshops to go with it.

And yet the truth is, all these things are bearing very little fruit if any.

In July 2021, we still had one of the most brilliant young players being racially abused by thousands of people online because he missed a penalty.

There's just so much hatred and division in our world. Did you know that 2 people are killed in conflict every minute.

And so the question is, how do we as Christians find true unity in such a divided world?

I don't know if you are familiar with social media challenges but they have become very popular especially in the last year. You start something and challenge your friends on social media to do it, and they challenge their friends to do it and before you know it, it's gone viral.

So when the pandemic began, there was one about 25 push ups. I can't even remember what the aim was but I did it. Everyone was doing it, so I recorded myself doing 25 push ups. I wasn't married, so was still allowed to do stupid things

And the other one that has also been very popular is the before/after challenge. So you put up a picture with two parts: Before, when you had a lot of weight or were poorer; and then

after, when you have hit the gym or have made a lot of money.
And then you provide a caption on how the change came about.

The other version of it is: How it began, how it is going

And I think that's how this passage works.

There is a before, an after, and a caption on how it was done

1. The Before

v.11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)— 12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

It is difficult for us to fully grasp the extent of the divide and animosity that existed between the jews and gentiles.

But it must have been something like what was there in Rwanda where my wife comes from: the Hutu and Tutsi, where one group didn't even consider the other as human beings.

Or the apartheid in south Africa: white vs black. It's sth of that scale and worse

You see every single day, a jew would pray thanking God that they were not born a gentile.

And it was not just racial, it was political and even theological: the jews thought to themselves that they are the people of God, and rather than being humble about it having not contributed anything to it, become very proud about it.

Now in Western Europe you might not realise how derogatory it is to call someone "You uncircumcised person" but in many cultures in the world, even today- that's a terrible insult.

The divide was deep.

There would never even been an imagination that this divide could be solved.

And so Paul tell the gentiles, Remember what you were

Separate from Christ (and in this instant, the Jewish Messiah is in view). The chief element of Jewish identity and hope was the expectation of the messiah. The gentiles didn't have that.

Excluded from citizenship in Israel, again not Israel the country but Israel as people of God. They were refugees if you like

And related to that, foreigners to the covenants of promise- the privilege that came with citizenship

And even more tragic, without hope and without God in the world. The word there is *atheia* is what we get the word atheist from. They were atheists.

That's their before. Remember that!

2. After:

v. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

And nearer here is not like when you are playing hide and seek and oma is cheating for you so she says nearer nearer nearer. No!

You have found it

v.19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people (all visa issues sorted, inburgeren exam passed, and you're just from the gemeente to receive your citizenship. Done and dusted! You're a citizen)

But just being a citizen can be very impersonal, and so he uses the image of family- and also members of his household. Did you know that all Christians are relatives?

But even family can be very generational and transient, right? so he uses the image of a building in v. 20

I don't know when this building was built, but if you are one of the stones used to build this building, there's a sense of permanence and belonging there.

They will need to destroy the house to remove you, that's how safe you are in Christ as part of what is used to build a dwelling place for God.

You see, That's the after. From far away to Brought near. Included. Indispensable members of the people of God. The contrast is huge.

But how's that possible? How can people so divided over thousands of years be brought together in this tight way?

3. How it was done

v.14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

You see, the divide was not just ideological. Just like the Berlin wall, there was a physical wall in the temple that separated the two groups. The gentiles were never allowed to go past that wall into the inner courts. Their place was the outer courts

We don't have many fenced areas in the NL but I'm sure you've seen those trespass warnings signs. No Trespassing, Violaters will be prosecuted

I saw a funny one on bol.com at only 10 euros: WARNING: No trespassing. Violaters will be shot, survivors will be shot again.

You might find that funny, but trespass for Gentiles was punishable by death if they crossed that dividing wall.

It was such a stark symbol of their deep division. It kept everyone in their place

Every easter we read of the curtain inside the temple that was torn into two. Paul is saying it's not just that curtain that was torn into two, the dividing wall outside was also brought down at the cross.

The law with its commands and regulations there mean the old covenant governed by the Mosaic law. The dividing law covenant was pulled down and a new covenant established

V15b, His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity(the church) out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Not so much here, but if you come from hierarchal cultures like mine- it is easy to think of God as some of those top gvt officials with layers and layers of people and bureaucracy around that it is just too difficult to meet them.

And even if you get an appointment, you probably will be on the queue for months before it is your turn. Not so with God

V.18 For through him we both (jews and gentiles) have access to the Father by one Spirit.

No appointments needed. 24/7 unlimited access to the creator of the universe

Do you see that no one has more access to the father than others?

Because I'm clergy I often have people asking me to pray for them. Which I'm very happy to do. By all means shoot an email.

But there's one category of people I don't pray for. I don't pray for you if for any reason you think that I have more access to God than you do because a bishop popped his hand on me and I wear a collar.

There is no Us vs Them, no Clergy vs laity in its exaggerated expression, no those who speak in tongues and those who don't, no insiders or outsiders, Tutsi or no Hutu, no black or white. Those things have no place among God's people.

Our identity and unity is in the fact that we didn't deserve, but God saved us by his grace.

Recently elected archbishop of Sydney in his acceptance speech said that there is no greater privilege, no greater title, than to be called a child of God.

Do you see that you must not feel inferior here, or for some of us, superior.

Do you see that Western individualism has no place in the church. There's no lone ranger Christian.

The calling is not just to walk with God, it is to walk with God together. It is not just to love Jesus, it is love Jesus together.

And that's only possible because of the cross. It is the unifying and levelling factor. It is the secret and engine of Christian unity