

PENTECOST 8 YEAR B / 22 JULY 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM

From 1961 to late 1989 there was a wall in Berlin. The wall divided German people, and in particular the people of Berlin for 28 years. It kept members of families apart. It was the source of much human sadness and heartache. It was also the cause of somewhere in the region of 200 deaths of German people, most of whom were shot trying to cross from east to west. It was an abiding symbol of the types of political categories – categories which have nothing to do with our essential humanness – political categories which are used by the powers that be to keep human beings apart. It is of some interest that the very same year the Berlin Wall began to be dismantled was the same year in which the United States built the border fence between USA and Mexico as a means of keeping Mexicans out.

It is not just political classifications which do that: we humans have many different bases on which we do it. The one which concerns us today through our readings is the human propensity expressed through religion to create walls between people.

The reading from 2 Samuel is a fascinating comment on an aspect of Jewish religious life. The passage may well have been written down many generations into the life of the Jewish nation and a long time after the temple had been built. What is interesting is that the passage demonstrates a very open understanding of the place of the temple in the life of the people. The scenario that is painted in the reading is that King David has conquered all his enemies, within Israel in particular, and finds himself nicely ensconced in his palace. Whereupon he finds himself with an attack of guilty conscience.

(read 2 Samuel 7:1,2)

If biblical scholarship has it right about when this passage was written the attitude to the importance of the temple is quite fascinating. Here in this passage is a somewhat ambiguous attitude to the place of the temple in religious life when one assumes that there would be no question of its importance and place. The word of the Lord provided as the words of the prophet Nathan are hardly a ringing endorsement of temple-based religion.

(read vv. 6,7)

“Should God live in a house or a tent?” seems to be an open question as far as God is concerned. And as a religious tradition with far more buildings than we can possibly use creatively, that is not a bad question for us.

A tenting God is a God on the move. A housed God is not. And of course, the earliest church – which had no rights to own property simply because it was not a recognised legal entity – framed its life not around buildings but around people. In that sense it was a movement not a religion. Without all the trappings which we now see as essential to being a congregation, it spread out across the known world. It didn't run any programs that we know of: it just spread between people who didn't have a church to run, just a group to belong to. I suspect the Roman Emperor Constantine didn't do the church many favours when he decided to make Christianity the religion of the empire and established a close link between church and state.

The other thing about a housed God is that the God becomes located in time and space. Put another way: it becomes a domesticated God to the one's providing the housing. Do you remember those awful days when we wouldn't walk into a Catholic Church? The God housed in Catholic Churches was a “foreign” God: the God of the Catholics. And doubtless Catholic people had the same perspective on walking into a Protestant church building. Part of that relates to the fact that once you have a building then along with that comes certain ritual practices which take part in that building and are, in large measure, determined and constrained by the shape of the building. And often those religious practices are seen as demonstrating the nature of the god being worshipped and therefore a different god.

In the case in point in the context of the Jewish people, God because a Jewish God. Sure there were big claims made for this God in terms of their God being ruler of the world. But those claims were based not on God being the God of the other nations. Far from it. The Gods of the other

nations were seen as idols and useless while Israel's God was the true God. In other words, God was a national God: God belonged to one nation, just as some years ago we had denominationalised God: we had a Protestant God and Catholics had a Catholic God etc.

There is a delightful twist in the message delivered by the prophet. Here was David saying that he would build God a house, but the boot is on the other foot as far as God is concerned.

(read vv. 11b-12, 16)

God will build David a house, but by that is not meant a physical dwelling. God will build David an ongoing heritage through his son Solomon and beyond.

I suppose, you could put the thrust of this passage in the sentiments of God singing that old song which was around in my youth: "Don't fence me in.." The penchant of human beings to domesticate and house God within our own limits is really our endeavour to ensure that we retain some special and exclusive rights and claims over and above those who are different. We want God staying within our own territory. We want a God who stays put in every sense of the word. Having a housed God also reflects a sense of being chosen and special in comparison to others. That sense of specialness has obvious ramifications when it is linked with nationalistic political and military considerations. God is obviously on "your" side in any conflict. We make special arrangements and have moving church ceremonies when the bodies of our servicemen killed in Afghanistan are returned home. And that is right and proper. But do we ever ask whether there are bodies in Afghanistan killed by our own. Are such as those less important in God's eyes than our own?

Now you see, the experience of God by the Jewish people was legitimate spiritual experience. Just like the experience of the Indian people of God through their Hindu religion is legitimate spiritual experience. God's life in our world is meant to be experienced; through revelation of God's self; through incarnation in special people; and through God's providential care in human life. In other words, God will and must be experienced locally. But what humanity has done with those experiences of God is to transmute the sacred being behind them into an exclusivist, patriarchal and imperialistic home-grown deity. The hospitable, welcoming God is converted into a local, nationalistic, housed deity who encourages such followers to build barriers of mistrust and greed between them and those who know God in a different context.

Our Ephesians passage gives some insight into the barriers that are generated by localizing God. I spoke before about how the activities in other Christian traditions – such as cross oneself with holy water or genuflecting to the altar – were seen by us as very suspect. Different traditions develop different rituals and sacraments. The defining sacrament, as far as Jewish people saw it, which made one Jewish, was circumcision. It became a hot potato in the early church whether Gentile men should be forced to be circumcised if they wished to be followers of Jesus. It was such a defining characteristic as far as many Jewish people are concerned. That ritual was something of a dividing wall between the Jewish Christians and those from other ethnic backgrounds whom Jews lumped together with the title Gentile. Paul is using the crucial place in which that ritual was held as a means to show that such localized traditions and the exclusive claims they implied are dispensed with in the life of Jesus.

(read Ephesians 2:11-14)

In the temple in Jerusalem there literally was a dividing wall, in fact there were a few. The temple was constructed such that it demonstrated the preferences of God. The very outer court was called the Court of the Gentiles: it was as far away from the action as one could get and be in the temple precincts. Between the court of the Gentiles and the court of women (the next farthest away and the next least favoured group in the Jewish God's eyes) there was a dividing wall on which was a sign warning Gentiles to come no further in.

Now of course, the author of Ephesians was Jewish: that is painfully obvious by his description of non-Jews as "having no hope and without God in the world." We shouldn't be surprised by that: some of us may have once felt that about certain other brands of faith, even certain brands of Christian faith. That bias is found in so much of the New Testament which of course was written against a background of exclusivist Jewish faith and mainly by Jewish men. Having said that, the essential thrust of the author's words is clear: the removal of all those things which divide people.

That, he suggests, has been done in the very flesh of Jesus. “In his flesh he has made both groups into one.” Now remember, he has just spoken about circumcision as being something “made in the flesh” by human hands. Here he is saying that Christ has done in his flesh – and certainly not through the fact that he was circumcised – what circumcision could never achieve: one humanity.

(read v. 15)

If you ponder the place of a cross in first century Roman dominated countries, you begin to get a glimpse of what the author might be getting at. In that world the cross was the symbol of Roman public terrorism: it was the stake on which all political dissidents – we now call them terrorists – were hung. If you think about terrorism in our world and ask what it is you begin to see that it is in fact the most deeply held antagonism of one group of people towards another.

There was a brilliant article in the Age not long after the September 11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers. It was written by a man named Richard Neville – who I notice is one of the participants in next Monday night’s “Q&A” program on ABC. He suggested – almost prophetically – that the fundamental question for the American administration to ask before ever thinking about revenge was: “Why do the people who have perpetrated this act hate us so much? Is there something we have done as a nation which has triggered such hatred that a group of people would put in so much planning and sacrifice the lives of some of their own just to make a statement such as this action is designed to do.?” We know now that the Bush administration never asked that question but moved immediately into revenge mode. Had they asked why the Taliban fighters were so angry for example with some openness and honesty, the world might have been a different place today. The Taliban were once the ally of the Americans in the fight against the Russian invasion. When US goals in that country were achieved and Russia was driven out, these freedom fighters were then dumped by American foreign policy and declared enemy when they were no longer required as allies: no wonder the Taliban were angry.

There is some irony in suggesting that a cross – the implement of the might of Rome to suppress all who might stand up to their invasion and cruel rule - ..in suggesting that the cross itself might be the means by which that deep seated enmity and hatred might be put to death.

(read v.16)

It is a bit like saying the electric chair killed the death penalty. It is a statement full of irony. But I believe that here is the heart of the gospel. In the body of one of us named Jesus, all the animosity of state sanctioned violence and the mob violence that goes with it, was let loose and absorbed. He would not even denounce his executioners in the agony of the cross.

Years ago, in England, when executions were conducted in public, seating was built around the place of the execution and tickets were sold to those who wished to attend and watch. As the victim was brought out – and often the offence was trifling – people in the crowd would hurl abuse and insult and even rotten fruit at the person about to be executed. It was discovered that subsequent to such events there was a great bonding of those who had attended and a new sense of oneness and camaraderie and belonging. They all felt better about themselves having seen that they were not like that criminal who had been executed.

Let me finish by saying this: the ultimate victim has been executed and in his death you and I and every other human being on this earth are bound together in a blood bond. And in every instance in which we deny the reality of that one humanity, that removal of all hostility, that bond between all people realized in the body of Jesus, in the words of Paul, we crucify Jesus again.