

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

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2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 53; Ephesians 2:11-22; Gospel: Mark 6:30-34

In the time of Christ there was a stone wall which separated the inner and the outer parts of the Temple in Jerusalem. Strangers were strictly forbidden to pass through, and this barrier became a token of the separateness that existed in the mentality of the people of that time. The Scriptures declared that the Jews were God's holy people, set apart and consecrated, and not to be contaminated by contact with Gentiles who worshipped false gods. The Law enforced this separation, so that socially it was impossible for a Jew to enter the home of a non-Jew nor to eat there, as this would go against the laws of purity, both of the body and of the soul.

Just as happened with the Jews in the Temple, there are barriers which tend to separate people today. We see in the world around us, all too clearly, the divisions within countries and between peoples, causing wars, loss of life, and ongoing hostility. We humans are rather good at creating divisions, tangible and intangible ones. Sometimes we give them names...The Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall...Apartheid.....maybe it is about Christian versus Muslim, or 'labour' versus management, or rich versus poor. It's often, still, a world of 'us' and 'them'. Sometimes, sadly, amongst Christians, there is a blindness which fails to see Christ in others, and an arrogance which causes divisions between those who disagree in doctrine. We tend to believe we are right, and other people are wrong, especially if they look different, speak differently, or have different customs. We often fear what we do not yet understand. Sometimes, in families, there can be anger, jealousy, and possessiveness which divides members one from another...It is particularly sad when such rifts, which may have been there for years, are left unhealed and only emerge after a person has died. It is all too common...people who for some reason have decided to no longer communicate, because of some past hurt or other...and often we need to ask God for healing and forgiveness beyond death, because otherwise the pain can be carried on into wider parts of a family and into the next generation, and do yet further damage. Often, if we are honest with ourselves, we can see barriers within ourselves, which separate the angry self (me) from the forgiving self (me)...the one who longs to say 'I am sorry' is at odds with the part of myself which cannot leave the hurt and the resentment behind.....so we keep the barrier up, even when we know that it is just possible we might be in the wrong!!

In today's Old Testament reading we have the story of King David and his adultery with Bathsheba, a story which, understandably, has captured the interest of the modern world of movies! As David was the most powerful man in the land, and, we are told, he was beautiful to look at, a very attractive man, there was nothing to stop him from carrying out his plan...It is interesting to realise that this whole episode began with David just **looking** at Bathsheba....and the desire to possess her followed the **looking**...reminiscent of Eve and the apple in the Garden of Eden...it is the story of humankind, isn't it...we **see** something, we want to have it, even if we know that it may not be good for us...and we believe that we **need** it!!!! Modern advertising is all based on this...tempting us to believe that we must have something even when we don't **really** need it!!!

Anyway, David's desire for a relationship with this beautiful woman, even though he knows she is the wife of someone else, leads him into further problems when he later discovers that she is expecting his child. It leads him to more deception, as he tries to manipulate her husband into his plan, to make it seem as if the child she is expecting is her husband's child...and when this plan fails, David eventually contrives Uriah's murder in order to put himself beyond suspicion. If we had read the full story here, we would read in verse 27: '***But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.***' The prophet Nathan later helps David to acknowledge the wrong he has done, and David is then filled with remorse, and seeks God's forgiveness....**but we see that not even David's penitence could free him from the fateful consequences of his actions.** It seems as if a chain reaction of tragedy and pain in the family is set off from this story of lust and murder, and even corrupts David's own sons much later on. But that is another story for another day. What is important for us to notice here is that God's purposes cannot be defeated by the evil in David's life. God had made a promise to David, to preserve his line forever...and this promise meant that the king's people shared in this eternal guarantee. In one sense, David was a victim of his own greatness, and his drive for success....in another sense, he was involved in a conflict with the God he tried to serve....he was caught between his two conflicting desires. The story shows us his humanness, his fallibility...but it also shows us the love and faithfulness of God. The implication throughout the story is that **no** event, whether it is adultery or rape, or even murder, **has been beyond the purposes of God.** God can still use them to accomplish his will. God is actively present in **all** of human life, no matter how dark and ugly it may seem, and can use even our mistakes and failures to work his purpose in the world.

Today's New Testament readings invite us to look at how the conflicting or disparate parts of ourselves, our families, and our world, can come together in Christ. Paul's letter to the Ephesians tells us how in the body of Christ...as believers, we can be reconciled one to another, and be drawn closer together into the family of God. **All** of us, that is, with all our faults, our failings, our waywardness....God is continually inviting us to be changed, to conform to his image...it is a life-long process...for each one of us. The Christian message, in a world that encourages an 'Us' and 'Them' mentality, reminds us that there is no 'them'. There is only **Us**, all of us, right here in the same boat, members of the same body...with Christ as the head. Christ himself is our peace.

Mark's Gospel today shows us a picture of Christ as a shepherd, whose love and concern for his sheep took precedence over everything else. His first response was to the needs of his apostles, who were exhausted from teaching and preaching and needed time and space to recover...to come away and rest. But Jesus then has to put his personal concerns aside because of his pastoral concern for others. Most of us are usually willing to help or be present to others, but very often it is on our own terms. Jesus shows us that we need to be open and responsive to the needs of others, even if this involves a degree of self-sacrifice. Jesus was never afraid to let people know that he cared about them. He never saw people as a crowd, but as a collection of individuals, each with problems and worries...many of these problems may well have been of their own making...just as David's problems in the Old Testament, and just as our problems often are today. Jesus had compassion for them, precisely **because** they were in need of his words, and his power to heal. He longs for us to be healed too, so that we may offer his love and healing to others. True compassion, if we are to

be followers of Jesus, will always be costly in terms of our time, our energy, and our resources.

So in our lives we are offered two challenges...no, opportunities..... this morning. Firstly, there is a need for us to cross barriers, to reach out to others, to reconcile and gather together both within ourselves and towards others. (e.g. see supplement to Natal Witness, this Friday...re Mandela's 85th Birthday...tribute by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "Mandela always saw an enemy as a friend waiting to be made" such a lovely tribute..a man of peace) Secondly, there may be a response we need to make to a parent, a child, a friend, or a stranger, which requires of us to use extra energy as we put our own wants or anxieties aside in order to attend to theirs. Let us ask ourselves if there is a barrier of any kind which may be separating us from God or from another person. Does it have to remain there? Is there something I need to do to break down a wall which is getting in the way of a good relationship? Am I willing to be used to help others reconcile to one another, or do I keep a safe distance when there is conflict? What is Jesus asking of me today, and am I willing to listen, and to lay aside some of my own agenda, in order to be obedient to his call? May we all have open hearts today, ready to follow our true Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who shows us the way to live, who offers us himself, the Living Bread, to sustain us on our journey, and who strengthens us by His Spirit, to do his work in the world. May we be a sign of the peace of Christ, wherever he calls us during this coming week.
Amen.