

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> June 2022**  
**Ephesians 2:11-22**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Slamannan Parish Church**

Let us come to God in prayer. Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and help us know what it means to follow Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

Every Sunday morning, I always check the news before I come out just in case something happens. I mean, I suddenly need a new sermon or need to change something. Thankfully, nothing on the news this morning of that ilk but on the news we're still headlines about the pandemic, about how Covid is changing and numbers, and bits and pieces, and how it still affects our life.

And the pandemic threw up so many issues for our world and for each of us individually. Whether it be lockdowns and masks, whether it be quarantines or everything else that came with that pandemic. There was so much. And one of the big challenges of the pandemic, clearly, was the very real and tangible isolation that we felt and, the longer it went on, and the greater our fear became, the greater, also, our sense of alienation from one another. And we might know people who are still in that place, they're still feeling that way, that to come out to church, to come out to shops or things in the community, is still a scary thought, a fearful thing that they hold back from.

Pastor and theologian John Stott said that 'the breakdown of human relationships is truly a dehumanizing experience for it is then that we become strangers in a world in which we should feel at home.' We become strangers in a world in which we should feel at home. But it's not only the pandemic that has made us feel that way or can make us feel that way, there is, of course, much change in the church just now. Numbers are falling, number of ministers are falling, the finances are falling, everything is falling and so, as part of that, we are having to very much consider which churches are going to close and unite, which buildings are going to shut, and that can be uncertainly, it can raise worry and fear for us, and it can make us feel a little bit adrift in that, in between time, and the prospect that it might be our church or our building, our congregation that's affected, can make us feel that what has been a place of solace and comfort, of respite and sanctuary, is a threat. And so, maybe what felt home is now we're feeling a little bit like strangers in a world where we should feel at home with that. We don't yet know what's happening with the Presbytery Plan. We don't know what changes are coming so, as we wait, as we face that future, as we face our own futures beyond the church, in the pandemic, what grounds us in these times? What keeps our hope alive? Is there something we can hold to that might even maintain our optimism and motivation?

Paul was writing to a group of churches that were facing their own tough times, probably tougher than we're facing in our days, and he writes to ground them, he writes to inspire and comfort them and, especially, he wants them to understand what they have gained through Jesus, what it means to be a Christian and part of the church. And so, he says to them 'Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles, 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'. He wants them to remember, he wants them to remember what they didn't have before Jesus. They didn't share in the covenants of promise. They didn't share in those great promises God had given to His people of old, of what He was going to do in the world and for the world and have a people of His own. They didn't know any of that. They didn't share in any of that. And so, they didn't, he says they were without hope, they didn't have hope before Jesus, because they didn't know God's plans and promises and they didn't know His plans and promises because they were without God, they didn't know God, they didn't have a true knowledge of God, they didn't have fellowship with God. All this was true of them before they came to know Jesus.

You know friends, the same is true of us, the same is true of us. It's not automatic that we share in these things. It is not a right. It's not owed to us. We are really in the same position before Jesus is known to each of us.

But Paul goes on. He goes on to say 'But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.' Through Jesus we are brought near to God, we are reconciled to God and so, now we do share in these things, we share in God's promises, we share in His plans and so, we do have hope even in the darkest of times, because we truly know God and we enjoy fellowship with Him. And so, with Jesus, we share God's blessings and have peace with God. But how easy is it to forget all this? I'm not preaching anything you've probably not heard a million times in all your days of coming to church, but it's so easy to forget this, to even devalue it during the pandemic. I'm sure we all learn to revalue things. To revalue a hug and an embrace. To revalue being able to see people face to face rather than just use a phone call or learn the frustration of Zoom or whatever it might be. Or have to keep social distance with people. Of the freedom of being able to sing without a mask again and much more, much more besides. There' are things we learn to re-value.

And the same is true of our faith. It's very easy for this good news to become old news and I was just to shrug it off and especially if we have been around church for a long time, if we've maybe been a part of the church since we were a babe in arms, is very easy for us to end up undervaluing this. 'Oh, here's this young preacher, he's just saying the same old stuff. I've heard this every Sunday!' But how we end up undervaluing because we need to remember that without Jesus, without a faith in Jesus, this stuff is meaningless. For many, it would simply be empty and church would just go on around us. You may find that you've got a place in church but the reason church becomes meaningful really is because you end up knowing Jesus, you have a faith in Jesus and so, with Jesus, we share God's blessing and His peace and that's what grounds us, it's what sustains us and gives us a hope, and I hope you know that hope yourself, for your own self and your days and your struggles and whatever you might be facing.

But Paul says there's even more to what it means to be a Christian, there's even more good news that we've got to share. And so, he goes on. He says 'For he (that is Jesus) for Jesus himself is our peace who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the

barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.' His purpose was to create Himself one new humanity out of the two thus making peace. Again, he's trying to help them remember what was before they had Jesus, that there was this division between people and that was especially true in Paul's day where there were the Jews and basically everybody else, the Gentiles, there was as he says in verse 11 'the circumcision and those uncircumcised', there was such division, hostility, animosity between these two groups.

I'm sure we all know of groups in our own day where there is such division and animosity but, in the day of Paul, that division carried over into the temple and into religious life as well and even in how the temple was structured. And so, you had three courts within the temple. You had the inner two, which Jews were allowed into, but then you had the outer court, The Court of the Gentiles, but not only were the Gentiles relegated to the outside space, that court was lower down and can you imagine being significantly lowered down and always having to look up and wonder what's happening up there and you're excluded and you're just not allowed in and that being reinforced by literally a wall we read here of a barrier, the dividing wall, and we think he's just maybe speaking metaphorically but he's actually being literal, he's been literal, that there was a barrier there, a one and a half meter high barrier all around those inner two courts to keep the Gentiles out and on that barrier there were signs at regular intervals in both Greek and Latin saying that if you trespassed you were going to die, they would put you to death. Such was the threat they made. Great division, but Paul is saying here in Ephesians that that dividing wall, that barrier, that hostility has been overcome, has been taken down through Jesus because He's made one new humanity and a united people because on His cross, in His death He is reconciled not only to God but to one another as well.

And so, those past practices have been overcome, they've been done away with, they've been relegated, they're no longer relevant to have those different courts and to have that external barrier, It's not relevant any longer.

So, what about in our day? What about in the church? Is this unity seen or do people see division in the church? And maybe we would point to say 'Well, in the Upper Braes and the Braes we're doing quite well. We've got joint services like a couple of weeks ago and it was great to be up here in Slamannan and in the Community Centre and have 180 of us all together. And we do Holy Week and we do World Day of Prayer and there's maybe more besides. But, but, does that outside world look upon us, and as we sang in just one of our hymns there, does it just see division and schism? Does it see a separateness amongst the churches?

And it makes me wonder actually, whether God might be using the decline of the church to bring about something, to bring about a greater unity, because we refuse to do it ourselves. Not that He's bringing it about but that He's using it, using it to teach us, using it to refine us, using it to make real what is true spiritually, that we are one people. There is no Slamannan or Brightons or Blackbraes and Shieldhill and Muiravonside really. These are all labels, labels that will not be there in eternity. There is no division in Jesus and so maybe God is using it, using it to improve our witness, to improve the

mission of God here because it's, we get very defensive about our church and my building and our folk and our way of doing things, in our traditions, and we're all as bad as the next, but maybe God wants to help us see that actually we are new and united people and maybe it's time to live that out more fully.

Some food for thought over Sunday lunch.

So, with Jesus, we're sharing God's blessings and peace, with Jesus we're made a new and united people, what Paul says, and a few verses he says an awful lot. He says there's even more good news. He goes on to say 'Consequently, you're no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.' And what Paul wants to get across to us is that, with Jesus, we have **place**, we have **purpose**, and we have **presence**. I know I'm throwing a lot at you but I blame Paul, he's just he manages to condense so much good news into so few verses. So, let me just talk you through this.

We've got place because he says that we're now citizens of the kingdom of God. He says we're children of God Almighty. he is our Heavenly Father. We've got a place, a good place, a place in the kingdom of the Son, the kingdom of light. We've got a place in a family that spans the generations, the centuries, the continents, cultures. That's our place now. That's our place but we've got purpose he says that God is building something. He's building a people, a people who are made into a temple. That this temple, there's not a building like this or like down in Brighton, it's not a temple in one place like in Jerusalem though, His temple is made up of people across all the nations, across all time, a living temple and that we are part of that. We are part of an international eternal group of people. We are part of that, founded on Jesus who's the cornerstone, who gives it its dimensions and shape and alignment. With Jesus we are part of that building. but we've also got presence because he says in verse 22 that 'you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.'

Friends, I think it was understanding the role of the Holy Spirit that most profoundly changed my Christian faith in some ways, other than the fact that I needed saving and I needed faith in Jesus, that was number one, number two was the role of the Holy Spirit that in each of our lives God's Spirit is at work, that in each of us God resides by His spirit and also as Paul teaches here, amongst us, as a people, God is building a dwelling place to dwell by His Spirit to work and be at work in the world through us. We don't just labor in our own strength, we don't just have to rely on our own resources, God is really there to help us and work through us just like he did with George and he took that step away and God carried him through and opened doors and made his message receptive. The Spirit was at work and the same is true for each and every one of us, brothers and sisters, we are being built together to be a temple where God's presence, His Spirit is at work in us individually and amongst us corporately. We're citizens, we're children, we're a holy temple carrying the presence of God and the good news.

Friends, is that, this can't be taken away, it can't be lost, it can't be changed. I think one of the struggles with the pandemic was not only the isolation but that we felt powerless to do anything in the face of it a mini virus that you can't even see and yet it shuts down the world, and we felt so powerless to change that, to do anything in light of it. It robbed us of so much to be taken for granted we felt powerless to do anything.

But Paul is saying that these things cannot be taken from you. They cannot be lost because they don't depend on you, they don't depend on human resources, they depend on Jesus, on His power, His power displayed on the cross. He died to secure that for you and it cannot be taken from you friends. It's good news that lasts the generations and all the seasons of life and so whatever comes in life, whatever lies in the future, for the British churches, this is us, this is who we are through Jesus. We're people who share in God's blessings and peace. We're people who are united. We are people who have place and purpose and presence. It's all a gift. It's all of grace. It can't be taken or lost whether that's by death or circumstance, decline or change. This is us. This is what we have in Jesus, who we are in Him, and it is as unchanging as Jesus Himself is.

So, what are you going to do about it? Is this just an old, another rambling sermon and you're just in one ear and out the other? Are you going to do something about it are you going to go back to your everyday life here in Slamannan and further afield, and are you going to live this out, you're going to live out your identity with Jesus? And you can live out loud and proud or in a more quiet and confident manner. It's up to you, but will you live out your identity, will you revel in it, will you rest in it, will you remember what you have through Jesus and allow it to be good news that you share, that grounds you, that gives you hope and motivation, come what may?

I pray it may be so. Amen.