

The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 23:1-6
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 2:13-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 6:30-34

The sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In this case we're looking at chapter 2, verses 13-18 — very famous section of the letter on whether Christ abolished the law and how his action toward the law reconciled Jew and Gentile to one another. So let's look at Ephesians 2:13, and we'll begin there as it says:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.¹

Okay, that's Ephesians 2:13-18. A number of things I want to say here about this passage. First, notice that in that first line, Paul talks about being “in Christ Jesus”. This is one of the central themes in the Pauline letters, the idea of being “in Christ” — the idea that there are two spheres of reality. You're either in Adam, if you're

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

still in part of the old creation and under the sin of Adam (under what we could call Original Sin) or you're in Christ, if you, through faith and Baptism, have become a member of His Mystical Body.

So here Paul is speaking to the Ephesians, and he's talking about the nature of the reality of them being in Christ Jesus. And one of the aspects that he brings up is that if those to whom he is speaking are Gentiles — which they are, this is in the city of Ephesus, a Gentile city — then now that they were in Christ Jesus, although they used to be far away from the people of God, from the covenant with Israel, they've now been brought near to God through the blood of Christ. In fact, they've been brought so near that there's now a unity between Jew and Gentile “in Christ” — in that new sphere of reality. In verse 14, it says very clearly:

For he is our peace, who has made us both one...

It's really difficult for us in our day of multiculturalism to kind of really grasp just how strong a division this was in the first century AD. One of the reasons the Jews were reviled by many Gentiles was because they saw the Jewish people as willingly separating themselves from pagan culture and Gentile culture, as having a line of division between themselves and the pagans.

And this division was very stark; it was very real. There was certainly no unity between the Jewish people as a people and the pagan peoples of the world who worship various gods and goddesses, deities. They worshipped emperors, they worshipped kings. It was just a very, very stark dividing line between the two.

So Paul here is trying to express to the Ephesians that through the death of Christ — through the blood of Jesus, through entering into Christ — that although they are Gentiles by birth, they really have become one now with the people of Israel. They've become one with the Jews, so that there's no more division between Jew and Gentile.

And the image he uses to describe the unity that's now been found between peoples in Christ is very striking. He says that Christ:

...has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...

Now on the one hand, it is possible that Paul is just using the image of a wall as a metaphor for division. So even to this day, if you want to keep someone out of your country, you build a wall. If you want to keep someone out of your house, you build a wall. If you want to keep someone out of any sacred area (like a temple or a church), you make walls around it. That's what walls do — they divide things, and they can be intended to keep certain people out and certain people in. That's how they function.

So it's possible Paul is using it as just a general metaphor, but it seems more likely that he's actually alluding to an architectural reality that was part of Judaism in the first century AD, namely the dividing wall that was present in the first century Jewish temple at the time of Jesus and at the time of Paul, before it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

So for example, Josephus (first century Jewish historian, who was a priest in the temple before it was destroyed) actually tells us that in the first century AD, unlike — this is important, this is important. Unlike the tabernacle of Moses, which had no place for Gentiles, in the first century AD, by the first century, there was what was known (or what scholars refer to) as the Court of the Gentiles. There was an outer court in the temple which was a place where people from the pagan nations of the world, people from the Gentile nations of the world, who were “God fearers”, who believed in the God of Israel but had not received circumcision — so they accept the tenants of Israelite faith but they haven't entered into the people of Israel through the covenant of circumcision, for various reasons ... they could come to the temple and pray. They could come to the temple and worship, but they couldn't pass this wall that divided the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Israelites. So listen to Josephus' first hand description of the wall. He says this:

Such, then was the first court [a.k.a. “Court of the Gentiles”]. Within it and not far distant was a second one, accessible by a few steps and surrounded

by a stone balustrade with an inscription prohibiting the entrance of a foreigner (Greek *alloethnē*) under the threat of the penalty of death.²

That's Josephus' *Antiquities*, book 15, paragraph 417. So what Josephus is describing here is he says that if you went to the temple in the first century AD, the first court that you would enter would actually not be the Court of Sacrifice of Israelites. The first court you would enter was the Court of the Gentiles ... or what he just calls the first court, the outer court.

If you wanted to pass through that and actually get to where you could offer your sacrifices, there were a few steps up to a higher level and then a low stone balustrade, a stone wall, that separated Israel from the Gentiles — literally, separated the Israelites from the Gentiles. The Gentiles — and notice, these are not idolatrous Gentiles. These are Gentiles who believe in God, but they're still second rate citizens in the sense that they can't go in. They can't draw near to God. They can't draw *as* near to God as an Israelite could because of the wall of separation. And Josephus tells us that on that wall there was an inscription that prohibited a Gentile from going any further on the threat of the penalty of death.

Now this is really interesting. Up until the 19th century, we just had to take Josephus' word for that. That's what he said, but we didn't have any external verification of it. But in 1871, due to archaeological explorations in the city of Jerusalem, an inscription was found from that wall that actually tells us what the words were, what was said ... what you would have seen if you were a Gentile going into the temple. So here's a copy of the words of this temple inscription. It says this — the plaque that was discovered in 1871 reads:

No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for the death which follows.³

² Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.417, trans. LCL

³ trans A. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 141

Alright, very blunt sign there that if you think as a Gentile, you can go up those steps and enter into the Court of Israelites, you're taking your life into your own hands, because if they execute you as a result, it's your own fault. Okay, so that's what Paul's experience would have been of going into the temple, what Jesus' experience would have been of going into the temple. And so when Paul writes (while the temple is still standing with this inscription that we found, right there above the wall), when he says that Christ:

...has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...

... in verse 14, it's very likely that he's describing the fact that now we are in Christ, whether you're a Jew or Gentile, there is no more wall of division. You all have equal access to God through the blood of Christ. Why? Well, as he'll say elsewhere in his letters, like 1 Corinthians 6 (and 1 Corinthians 3 as well):

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? (1 Corinthians 6:19a)

And the Church is the new temple of God, and there is no more divisions between peoples. Now, how did this lack of division happen? Here we get into a difficulty. Paul says in verse 15:

...by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both...

...meaning both Jews and Gentiles...

... to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.

And there was hostility between Jews and Gentiles. But the problem here is this: How can Paul say that Jesus abolished the law of commandments in His flesh in Ephesians 2:15, when Jesus Himself in Matthew 5:17 says:

“Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.

This is one of those apparent contradictions that you see in Scripture. And I remember, I was very young, I had just started studying the Bible — really probably in my undergraduate years, probably my first year in college — when I stumbled onto this difficulty. If you’re reading through the New Testament in order, and Jesus says, “I have not come to abolish the law” and then in Ephesians chapter 2 you read Paul say “He abolished the law”, it’s striking. It catches your attention. How do we understand this? How do we make sense of it?

So I’ll say something in a second about that; we’ll get a little help from our friend St. Thomas Aquinas who thought about this some time ago. I wasn’t the first person to notice it. Before I do that, just notice the context, because context is always crucial. If you have a difficulty, that’s usually the solution. He says he abolished in his flesh the law ... for what end? Because the law was bad? No. Because there are two gods, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament? No. What’s the reason? So:

... that he might create in himself one new man ...

In Greek, *kainon anthrōpon* or *kainos anthrōpos* — a new *anthrōpos*. We get the word “anthropology” from that, “new man”. So:

... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.

So that everyone, Jew and Gentile:

... both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

So notice the Trinitarian context here. He’s talking about making one new man so that everyone can have access to the Father in the Spirit through the Son, by being in the Son.

Alright, so what is this image of one new man? Well, whenever you said that word *kainos*, *kainon*, in Paul (“new”), you should think old and new creation. This is that classic two circles that I’ve talked about in many videos — the two overlapping spheres of reality, the old creation and the new creation. And remember, the old creation can be described as being in Adam, like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, just like the new creation can be described as being in Christ.

And so what Paul was saying here is that although in Adam, in the old creation, there were divisions between Jews and Gentiles — like we see in the temple meant to separate them from one another, because they did not have equal access to the Father. “Now that you, Ephesians, are in Christ, that’s gone. That line of division is gone, and you now both have equal access to the Father in Christ through the Spirit.”

Okay, so that’s the context, that reconciliation between peoples has come about through the blood of Jesus. It gives access to God in a way that wasn’t there before. Alright, so how then ... What is the relevance of this for my conundrum that I raised about Jesus abolishing the law? How does this not contradict what Jesus says? And this would be my suggestion to you, and then I’ll read St. Thomas. You can take my suggestion with a grain of salt. You can take Thomas’ a little more seriously.

So my suggestion to you is this: when Jesus is speaking in the Sermon on the Mount, and He says that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it, what He’s speaking about there is the fact that He (during His lifetime) does not come into the world to break the laws of Moses, to abrogate the laws of Moses, or do away with the laws of Moses. He’s going to fulfill every jot and tittle, He says Himself. Jesus keeps the law not imperfectly, but perfectly — in fact, more perfectly than anyone else.

So what’s happening is, some people when they hear the things Jesus is talking about, it sounds as if He’s come to destroy the law or to abolish it, and He’s correcting that misunderstanding by saying, “No, no, no. I’m going to keep the law perfectly. In fact, not one jot or iota, one iota — there’s different for it, one jot or

title is the traditional right translation. It means not one letter, even the smallest letter of the law, is going to be loosed or be destroyed until all is brought to fulfillment.”

So He is going to fulfill the law perfectly in His lifetime. He’s going to fill every commandment. He doesn’t break the commandments. However, and this is where it’s important, He is — at the same time, through His death, going to put the old creation, which was under the old law ... He’s going to put that to death and inaugurate a new creation which will be with a new law and a new covenant, so that some aspects of the old law, which Jesus Himself kept perfectly, will in fact pass away and will not be a part of the new creation. And one of those aspects of the old law is going to be the division between Jew and Gentile — which Jesus Himself maintained, by the way. Remember what He says to the apostles in the Gospel of Matthew:

...but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matthew 10:6)

“I was sent to the lost sheep.” So it’s first to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles. After the resurrection, they’re going to go out to all nations. But the initial mission is first to the Israelites. That separation is maintained.

Now sometimes Gentiles will approach Jesus, and He will heal them, like the Syrophenician woman. But He doesn’t recruit any Gentiles to be members of His apostles. He maintains that distinction, that division, until He puts the old creation itself to death on the cross and then raises it up new in the resurrection.

So when Ephesians talked about Christ abolishing “the law of of commandments and ordinances”, notice what it says:

...by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man ...

So how does He abolish it in His flesh? By dying on the cross. It’s through the blood of the cross that Jesus puts the error of the old law to an end and brings the

era of a new covenant into existence. So it's not that He broke the law, but that He's inaugurating a new creation that really does make everything new.

So that'd be my way of trying to help you understand the distinction between the two. The abolishing of the law in His flesh is not about Jesus breaking the commandments. He didn't break any of the commandments. It's about Him putting the old Adam and the old creation — and with it, aspects of the old covenant — putting them to death in order to begin a new covenant and a new law.

So in closing, I'd just like to end with a quote from St. Thomas Aquinas. He dealt with this in his *Commentary on Ephesians*. He had a long commentary on Ephesians that he wrote, and this is what he says. He goes at it a little differently, but I think it's really insightful and helpful as well, obviously — authoritative too as a saint and Doctor of the Church. Aquinas says this:

A problem arises here since he says “breaking down the middle barrier or partition” [Eph 2:14] because, on the contrary, it is written: “do not think I have come to destroy (Greek *kataluō*) the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matt 5:17).

I should have said this, but I didn't. The words are not the same too — this is a little misleading in the English. See, in the English, it translates both words as “abolish”, but literally in the Greek, Jesus says: “I didn't come to *kataluō*”, to destroy the law. And Paul says that Jesus nullified, *katargeō*, the law. So it is different terminology, but I didn't want to get into the weeds of all that. But Thomas, of course, doesn't mind. He says:

I reply. The old law contained both moral and ceremonial precepts. The moral commandments were not destroyed by Christ but fulfilled in the counsels he added... “But I say to you, “love your enemies...” (Matt 5:43-44). He abolished the ceremonial precepts with regard to what they were in themselves, but he fulfilled them with regard to what they prefigured, adding what was symbolized to the symbol... To break down this

barrier of partition is to destroy the hostility between the Jews and the gentiles.”⁴

That’s *Commentary on Ephesians*, paragraph 114. So what’s Thomas talking about here? Here Thomas is making a standard traditional distinction between the moral precepts of the old covenant, like the Ten Commandments, and then the ceremonial precepts of the old covenant, like the kosher laws (for example) against eating pork or eating shellfish ... just to take an example. And so what Thomas is saying is that through His death, Christ abolishes or nullifies the ceremonial precepts that were meant to separate Jews and Gentiles, which is what those food laws were all about. There was nothing intrinsically evil about pork. If you go back even to the Old Testament itself, Adam, Noah, Abraham — they can all eat pork. They can eat shellfish. There are no laws. In fact, in Genesis 9, God says to Noah:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you...Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Genesis 9:3a, 4)

Noah can have a crawfish boil; it’s not a problem. So can Abraham. It’s only after Israel falls into paganism in Egypt that God gives the laws of *kashrut* cleanliness to the Israelites in Exodus — actually it’s in Leviticus — in order to separate them from the Gentiles. There are going to be certain practices that make them a distinctive people that divide them for the sake of their holiness, so that they can carry the covenant down through the centuries until the coming of Christ, who will then open it up again and restore things back to its Noahic or Noahite, like the time of Noah status when all foods are clean.

So what Thomas is saying here is, with His death, some ceremonial aspects of the old law do pass away, because they’re not permanent anyway. They weren’t temporary provisions. But aspects of the law that are permanent — like you shall not kill, that’s Cane and Abel, you shall not commit adultery — those aspects, the moral precepts, Christ does not abolish those. They’re perennial. They’re written on the human heart, and they’re part of the new covenant.

⁴ Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians* no. 114, trans. F. Larcher and M. L. Lamb)

And so, in closing then, the point ... the ultimate answer to this question is that the reason the division between Jew and Gentile has passed away is because Jesus inaugurated (through His death) a new covenant and also a new creation in which all human beings can achieve the unity that the world strives for but can never bring about by its own power, precisely through the blood of Christ and through entering into the one temple — the Body of Christ, the temple of God, which is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

This is why we have one Church, because there are no more divisions. We're going to come back to that. We're going to look at this. Paul will return to this in Ephesians 4, when he talks about the fact that there is one Lord, there's one faith, and one Baptism.