

Let us build a house...

A reflection on 2 Samuel 7:1-14 and Ephesians 2:11-22 for Sunday 18 July (OT 16B)

by Gillian Collins

"Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live...

All are welcome in this place" (Marty Haugen, StF 409)

Words from a hymn with a strong tune and affirming words, often sung (in more singer-friendly times) at large gatherings such as synods or conferences, where it's sometimes hoped that enthusiastic singing can make it come to pass. The intention of course is sincere, but the reality is so much more difficult.

The next edition of the circuit news magazine **Grapevine** will be with you shortly. It offers a digest of the recent Methodist Conference in Birmingham, covering briefly the main events, discussions and decisions, with recommendations passed on to circuits and local churches to make things happen in the real world. This isn't about "them" up there telling us "ordinary" people what to do. The Methodist Church is a Connexion, a network of local churches grouped together, and those local churches are "us". Our representatives took part in the Conference. We are "them". Does that make sense?

This year some very controversial matters were debated and decisions reached which eventually are bound to make ripples in our own local church life. (I'm not going to elaborate here – if you watched Conference online you will know; if not you will read about them in Grapevine). They haven't come out of the blue, but have been reached as a result of many years of theological reflection, reports presented and received or sent back for further work – we as the Methodist Church don't do anything in a hurry. But neither should we do anything without care and consideration for the impact of decisions and changes, especially on those who find those changes hard to adapt to.

In many areas of debate there were references to justice, discrimination, equality, diversity. There was a recognition of the need for repentance over past divisions and compassion for those who have been hurt on one or other side of a controversy. Reading this digest, you have to conclude that our Church has somehow allowed various barriers to arise or survive which are seriously harming the mutual peaceful flourishing of all or some of its members. Fortunately some have been recognised and are starting to be addressed: the marginalisation of women and of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds are two such areas. Other challenges remain to be confronted.

This is only a reflection of the world as it is and the society we live in, where issues of discrimination and exclusion are still rampant. Some of the barriers we erected for ourselves throughout history have fallen or faded (the Cold War, Protestant vs Catholic, Christian vs Muslim, though none of these has completely disappeared and all rear their heads again when conditions are ripe) but others are constantly erected to replace them. Not a day goes by without a news story about immigrants, with heated debates on how (or whether) we should receive and treat them.

We'd like to think that as a Church we don't exclude anyone – all **are** truly welcome. If that's true, then it's good news. But we live in a world of fences and barriers – they are everywhere we look. Some are political; some economic; some religious, some cultural or linguistic. Sometimes the strangers in our midst are from another country, with "foreign" accents, a different colour skin, different customs and different ways of being family. Perhaps they attend other churches – or no church at all. They are travellers. They are gay. They are "benefit-scroungers". Listen to the language around you, or notice it on social media. Whoever "they" are, they are different from "us".

The reading from Samuel (2 Samuel 7:1-14) tells how David wanted to honour God by building him a house. But God, speaking through the prophet Nathan, lets David know he's not interested in being put in a box. God is a free spirit, moving always among his people, leading them in new directions, not only shepherding them in the pleasant valleys, but challenging them to climb the steep and rugged pathways. Instead, God will build a house for David – not a building (though a great temple was later built and several times destroyed) and all **will** be welcome. But this house was to be very different from the temple. David was to head a royal house, from which would come a descendant "born of David's line". That descendant, Jesus, would become the foundation stone of the spiritual temple, a house not made with hands but built out of the hearts and minds and obedience of God's people, and in it there would be room for all. This is where all the debating, the discussion, reports and decisions are meant to be leading us – God's people, called Methodists.

Moving on to the reading from Ephesians (Ephesians 2:11-22). In the time of the early church there was one enormous barrier, which Paul the Apostle saw as his mission to break down – the barrier between Jews and non-Jews. He realised that there could not truly be one Church until this happened. Ephesians speaks of breaking down walls and barriers between the Gentiles and Jews (the great divide of the time) because God brings them together in Jesus Christ, making of them one spiritual house where God may dwell. It reminds them that they, the Jews, have also been strangers and aliens in a foreign land during their history, and God was constantly alongside them, leading them on. So they could not now put up barriers and sit behind them. All are called in Christ Jesus to be one – for through him the barriers of hostility, the walls of division, are broken down. All are welcome – a new creation has occurred, a new people of God has been made from people who formerly were strangers and enemies!

What saves us, we are reminded, is that we all belong to Christ. Race, gender, culture, biblical knowledge, conservative or liberal theology or politics, and heritage have no part in our salvation – all are chosen by God and all are loved by him. How far are we from God? Not far at all, thanks to Christ. How far are those whom we label as different from us from God? Not far at all, for in Christ the walls that divide are broken down. So we are challenged to look again at those we call "strangers". We need to see them not as different from us, but as essentially part of "us".

What barriers are part of the local and larger world in which we live? How do we contribute to those barriers, add bricks and mortar to their construction?

Think of the racial, economic and social barriers that mark our daily lives, many of them beyond our control to change, but which we need to acknowledge all the same. Think about how we relate to each other at work or school, at home and in the church. If any outdated assumptions and prejudices hinder our unity, we are called to let go of these things and let God build in their place a new house where all are truly welcome. We are always reminding ourselves that the church is not a building, it's the people. This has been brought home to us especially while we've been unable to meet in person. Conferences may come and go, and it's after they are over that the real work begins.

Hear how the writer of Ephesians describes the Church that will endure, that will be a fitting home for the eternal God, and notice it is God, not us, who is the builder:

"You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home." (Eph.2:19-22 The Message)

Amen