

Ephesians 3:1-12 The Gentiles

We pray...

Imagine for a moment...

You're a young parent, at home with your little child.
It's late at night, and you hear a knock at the door.
There's a group of strange men standing at the door.
They tell you that they came all the way to Australia to give some gifts to your baby.
How would you respond?

It's told a little crudely, but when it comes down to it, this is what we heard today in the arrival of the magi, these strangers, with their gifts for Jesus.

The story could have gone differently. Instead of the wise men, God could have sent close friends and family of Mary and Joseph with those gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

That would have certainly been a different story, a story more like what we're used to at Christmas time.

Friends and family arriving from afar bringing gifts to share at Christmas.

There's a big difference between a bunch of strangers showing up on your doorstep as opposed to some of your own.

This is a difference that is engrained into us from our earliest days.

We learn to trust those who are close to us. We depend on our families, we learn to love them (even on the bad days!), to care for them, and to lean on them for support.

In time, the circle expands, we meet cousins, aunts, uncles... and it's not just the family, we make strong friendships, and we build our trust circles wider.

We grow in our communities, we build that trust with our church family, with our colleagues at work, our teammates in our sports clubs...

But then there's the outsiders.

We learn 'stranger danger', to beware of those who we don't know.

And in this world of scammers and AI, we are almost required to distrust anyone we don't know.

It seems that naturally, we feel safe in our communities, while outsiders are a threat, a danger.

We have all these different words we use:

There's family, community, friends, locals...

Then there's outsiders, strangers, foreigners, aliens...

It can all be summarised in two simple words: 'us' and 'them'

With all this in mind, today we are drawn to one such word:
Gentiles.

This is a common word in Scripture. But what does it mean?

It comes from the Greek word: 'εθνος' (ethnos), sometimes it's translated as 'nations', and it's where the word 'ethnic' comes from. But as Scripture speaks in this way of the 'nations', it's not actually about all nations or all people, no, it's speaking quite specifically: There's God's people, Israel. Then there's the 'Gentiles'. That's everyone from every country, every culture, every language, every group, who don't belong to the people of God. The Gentiles are the outsiders, the foreigners. To God's people, 'us', the Gentiles are 'them'.

Throughout the Old Testament, we hear how things went for Israel as a result of the Gentiles. They had near constant threats, whether it was Egypt, Assyria, the Philistines, Babylon, or eventually, the Romans.

Even Jesus himself speaks plainly in these terms. He speaks of how the Gentiles run after worldly things. (Matthew 6:32) How he will be handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified (Matthew 20:19). And how Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles. (Luke 21:24)

That's the reality; us and them.

Then along comes the promised Messiah. This Jew born in the line of David to rule on his eternal throne. Very much one of 'us.' Of course, he came to his people, to bring healing, to set the captive free, to give sight to the blind. Finally, it seems that God's people could be free from 'them,' from the oppression and threat of the Gentiles.

But in Jesus, the Messiah, something doesn't quite fit. It was revealed the moment those wise men wandered into the picture from the east. Paul calls it a 'mystery', something that just doesn't quite seem to fit with our understanding of the world. This is how he speaks of that mystery:

The mystery of Christ,⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.
(Ephesians 3:4-6)

This mystery is that the Messiah, the Christ, the Saviour of God's people, he didn't just come for us. No, through the gospel, the Gentiles, that is, the outsiders, the foreigners, the strangers, they are members of the same body and share in the same promise. It's not us vs them, no, in Christ, it's us *and* them.

Paul repeatedly emphasises this mystery, that the Gentiles, the outsiders, can fully receive the grace of God, and find salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

In fact, much of the New Testament is dedicated to how Paul served to bring the Good News of Jesus to the Gentiles, the outsiders. And he sums it up plainly in our passage today from Ephesians:

Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.

(Ephesians 3:8)

But what does all this mean for us?

Well, most of us don't have Jewish heritage, so of course, this means that we are those who have been included into God's people through Christ.

But it's also something more.

Just a few weeks ago someone shared a story with me.

They had started a conversation with someone on a walk, someone who had recently come to Australia from Pakistan.

They learned that this person was not religious, but they had come from a religious community and had a good understanding of how different faiths lived out their beliefs.

Despite having no faith of their own, they shared that if they were ever going to be religious, they would be Christian.

Why?

Because the other faiths were great and caring for their own...

But the Christians cared for all.

See, in this world we are drawn to care for our own. To fear the outsider. It's us vs them. That's it's best to keep to ourselves and keep the outsiders out.

But as we celebrate all that is revealed in Christ, we see things differently:

Here is the Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords—our Saviour.

And he comes as a light for revelation *to the Gentiles*, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. (Luke 2:32, Acts 13:47)

So too, he calls us to go and make disciples of *all nations*, to get out into the world of strangers, foreigners, and outsiders, that the light of Christ would be seen among all people.

For this is who our God us: God for us. Who comes to us when we are strangers, when we made ourselves his enemies, he comes as our Saviour to make us his own. So we live as living expressions of Christ in us, as we push back against this divide of 'us vs them' and instead, proclaim in our lives, in our actions and our words, that through Christ, even that can be joined to share in all that the Lord has promised.

So may the peace of God, which is far beyond our human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

♪ AT 128 I am the light of the world

Pastor Jeremy Smith