

***The wall comes down***

**Luke 2** <sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” <sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

**Ephesians 2** <sup>11</sup> Don’t forget that you are Gentiles. At that time you did not know about Christ. You were foreigners to the people of Israel, and you had no part in the promises that God had made to them. You were living in this world without hope and without God, <sup>13</sup> and you were far from God. But Christ offered his life’s blood as a sacrifice and brought you near God.

<sup>14</sup> Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles, and he has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us. Christ gave his own body <sup>15</sup> to destroy the Law of Moses with all its rules and commands. He even brought Jews and Gentiles together as though we were only one person, when he united us in peace. <sup>16</sup> On the cross Christ did away with our hatred for each other. He also made peace between us and God by uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body. <sup>17</sup> Christ came and preached peace to you Gentiles, who were far from God, and peace to us Jews, who were near God. <sup>18</sup> And because of Christ, all of us can come to the Father by the same Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> You Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens with everyone else who belongs to the family of God.

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”*  
 At this time of year thousands of pilgrims flock into Manger Square in Bethlehem to celebrate Christmas. A few days ago I was watching a documentary about well-known graffiti artist Banksy and film director Danny Boyle organizing a Nativity play in Bethlehem just outside Banksy’s hotel, not the “Waldorf” but the Walled-off Hotel, because it is right next to the huge wall that separates Israel from the West Bank and which encroaches into the very heart of Bethlehem. The wall is enormous – 10 metres or 33 feet high, taller than the roof of this nave – and it is both a symbol and a visible tangible expression of the separation between Israelis and Palestinians. It has provided as you can imagine an irresistible canvas for Banksy’s artwork –



*A glimpse of paradise through the wall*



*Two Raphael like angels attempt to pull the wall apart*

It is not just ironic but tragic that such a monstrous barrier should have been built so close to where Jesus the Prince of Peace was destined to be born.

For Jesus came above all to break down barriers: between rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, men and women, man and God.

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As we can see all too easily around the world today, breaking down the barriers between different groups of human beings seems to be an almost completely impossible task. No sooner do we take one wall down and another springs up. Nearly 30 years ago we rejoiced in the coming down of the Berlin wall Iron Curtain which had separated not just East and West German, but Eastern and Western Europe and more recently in the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland. Since then, however, there have continued to be walls in Belfast, the huge wall has been erected in the West Bank, Donald Trump is threatening to build a wall along the border with Mexico, Catalonia is threatening to separate from Spain. And it is not just on the national and international level. We are probably all aware of where metaphorical walls have arisen in work places, in neighbourhoods, in families – where people have stopped speaking to one another, where friendships have turned sour. The trouble is that when we put up a barrier to God, it is very easy to start putting up barriers to our fellow human beings – viz Adam and Eve, no sooner had they disobeyed God and started hiding from him, than they started blaming one another.

All through history man has continued to have that sense of shame at having fallen short of

God's command to us to love our neighbours as ourselves and to love him with all our heart and so we have tried to keep God at a distance. We have, if you like, put up a wall between earth and heaven. But Christmas is all about God, tearing down that wall from the other side, removing the barrier and making the dangerous journey over to our side – it is all about God becoming a human being, one of us. He came as a human being in the most vulnerable and approachable way – as a new born baby. And He came as a baby, not born in a palace or in the safe seclusion of a remote grand mansion, but in a stable... where anyone – even those unpopular outcasts the shepherds, could come and see him. And he sent out an invitation both to foreigner and outcast to come and meet this baby in a way they could understand – to the Magi in the east, he organised a star, to the shepherds, He sent a heavenly choir of angels.

In other words, at Christmas, God has done everything He possibly could to break down the barrier and to make himself as approachable as possible – so determined is God, in his love for us, to bring about reconciliation and restore peace between Himself and you and me.

God has broken down the wall; He has sent out the invitation and He sends it out again and again, every single Christmas time. He reminds us again here and now. But - for us to know that peace, you and I need to listen to his voice and to respond to his love. We need to recognise that in Christmas, we see the extraordinary, committed, unconditional love that God has for us and to open our minds, and hearts and lives to Him. We have a choice: to remain stubbornly in our self-centred ghetto or to respond to God's invitation, and step through that breach in the wall into our true home: the Kingdom of Heaven.







