

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is an irresistible agent for healing and breaking down the walls that divide.
Luke 19:41-44

One of the overriding images of the latter part of the 20thC up to the present has been that of large dominating concrete walls constructed out of fear and dividing peoples and communities, one from each other. There was the Berlin wall built during the Cold War that lasted until 1989 slicing through the heart of the German people who shared a common ethnicity, culture and heritage and yet were now divided by two conflicting ideological world views.

Then there is the walled line arbitrarily drawn on a map by international superpowers along the 38th Parallel North, again dividing one people who share a common culture and history but are now identified by the labels of North & South Koreans. But today we are reminded of a more recent wall imposed by the nation of Israel like a jagged wound through the land of Jesus' birth in our present time, dividing Jews and Palestinians and effectively imprisoning Palestinians in their own homeland.

But before we are too critical of others we need to be reminded of the virtual sea 'wall' we have constructed around our own island nation to halt the flow of asylum seekers. The new government's policy named 'Operation Sovereign Borders' makes it clear this 'wall' is not about trying to save lives by discouraging desperate people from taking a risky sea voyage, but is one of border security. (A very disturbing sign was the announcement just yesterday that the new immigration minister has shut down the flow of information on the arrival of asylum vessels and the transfer of people offshore, demanding silence from the agencies in his portfolio, so that the Australian public from now on will be kept in the dark about how many people are arriving, and therefore unable to assess the implications of the policy.)

What is it in the human psyche that drives us toward division and isolation when confronted by something or some people that appear different to ourselves?

As I wrestled with this dilemma this week, both in terms of the wall slicing through the Holy Land and our own border security policies, I was reminded of American poet Robert Frost (1874-1963) who explored this human inclination to building walls in his poem "Mending Wall". In it he recounts the annual task in the Spring of mending the rock wall between his neighbour's pine trees and his own apple orchard. He unsuccessfully challenges his neighbour's need for the wall:

*There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under the pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours?"*

Earlier this morning I referred to the Berlin wall constructed during the 'Cold War' in Europe during the West's stand-off with communism. It reminded me of a published letter written a number of years ago by David Gill, then Gen Sec of the NCCA. In the letter David related how he had been in Berlin for a WCC conference, and of how it had brought back memories of a previous visit during communist times to "*that divided city, where the wall, the watchtowers, the armed guards, the minefields (had) dominated everything.*" His return to Berlin, once divided East from West by the wall, reminded him of how he commuted daily through the wall into East Berlin. He recalled the faces of the young students he met there

and who had to just stand and watch as (he) walked back along the path they would never be allowed to take.

David Gill then writes: *“That wall was so strong, so unchallengeable. Backed by enormous military might, it seemed destined to last for centuries. Then on 9 November 1989 with an extraordinary push of people power, without a shot being fired, the wall and all it represented crumbled into history.”*

One of the local church leaders, in remembering those days, related the words of a commander of the armed forces on duty on the wall that fateful day (in November 1989): *“We were ready for anything, said the commander, but not (for) prayers and candles – then suddenly, instead of running battles we had joyful celebrations in the streets. ‘No violence’, the slogan of a peaceful revolution.....It all seemed a bit uncanny to us....because there was no stone-throwing and no shooting.”*

Something that saddens me in our present age is a mood of despondency even despair that sometimes settles on us and our society; feelings we are powerless and that the things in our lives or our world we are unhappy about are ‘just the way things are’ and nothing can ever be done about them. It happens even in the life of the church where people become anxious about declining numbers, and various proposals are made about how to reinvent church or even market ourselves better, leading to even greater despondency.

But surely our simple calling is to trust in and offer an experience of the Gospel to others and our world.

For over 2000 years the promise of the Gospel – revealed in the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ – has continued to nurture, encourage and sustain life and hope in those who have come to embrace its truth. For over 2000 years it has continued to overcome barriers that divide people and communities, to heal hurts that diminish life, and has offered hope and peace where there had once been despair.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is an irresistible reality that refuses to die because it refuses to conform to the values of those who wish to control its message. It is an irresistible agent for healing and change because it stubbornly holds on to the truth that ultimately forgiveness and grace, compassion and justice, are what transform lives, relationships and societies.

And surely our calling is clear – we who have experienced the healing/transforming presence of Christ in our own lives and relationships. There is no reason for us to give into fear or despondency. Our calling is simple: to live in trust and hope and share with others that which has offered life to us

Let us then not fear the future, but remain ‘hope-full’ people, faithful to Christ, trusting the irresistible power of the Gospel to heal and transform our world and its people; to tear down the walls that oppress and divide so that all may have life. Amen