

Walls and Barriers

Later this year, in November, will be marked the thirtieth anniversary of the opening up of the Berlin wall. That was a seminal moment in recent history which saw the end of the East German Communist regime and other similar regimes in eastern Europe.

The Berlin wall and that between East and West Germany was built by the East German authorities to keep their own people in. It was constructed to stop their own population trying to move to the West. In that respect it was the exception rather than the rule. In most cases walls and barriers along borders are built to keep others out.

This is of course very topical at the moment with President Trump continuing to press for the building of a wall between the United States and Mexico. This is supposedly to resolve the security of the US against illegal immigrants. For the many critics, though, this is instead a way of ignoring the very real and serious humanitarian concerns.

There are of course fortified walls and barriers in other parts of the world. Last Sunday we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany. Unlike modern travellers the wise men would not have encountered a barrier to enter Bethlehem. Today a massive wall dominates the landscape around that town, cutting off people from their places of work and from other services. It is certainly a very intimidating sight. It was also built primarily for security, but its effect is to create further division between the Israeli and Palestinian populations.

Reconciliation is of course all about breaking down barriers, about demolishing walls. That is very much the message of our Bible reading just now from St Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus (Ephesians 2.14-18). There he is talking about breaking down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles and God's work of reconciliation through the cross to bring that about. Yet it surely has a wider relevance too, to any situation in which different groups are in conflict with one other.

That is of course easier said than done. If reconciliation was a simple process then we would see fewer conflicts in our world today. Reconciliation is hard work. Building walls does not help. It may provide a short-term solution but in the end it can only be counter-productive. Only true and deep dialogue can lead to lasting peace, in which mutual respect and trust are key factors.

As Christians we can offer hope to the world. For we have good news to proclaim: good news of God's love, of liberation, of justice. May the Church continue to be true to its calling to speak out and work for peace and reconciliation in God's world.

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