

## SERMON - FAITH IN CULTURE - WALLS OR BRIDGES

**"Where there is no vision, the people perish:"** says the book of wisdom

If you were looking for a verse from scripture that cuts to the heart of why this sermon series matters, its these piercing words of truth from Proverbs 29:18

If Christianity in the West is to rise to the challenge of how we communicate and live out our faith in culture ... How we reach out and connect with those who are no longer reaching out to us ..., we really do need to **envision** a way to respond to this challenge.

And it's a complex challenge with no one simple answer, and for different churches it will take on different expressions. But I genuinely believe, that at the heart of this challenge, lies a big question that we all have to face.

**Do we have a Walls mindset, or do we have a Bridges mindset?**

If you were here a few weeks back when I began this series, you will remember that I described the encounter between Cornelius the Roman Centurion and Peter the Apostle, as one of the most explosive in all of scripture. Explosive because of what it reveals about the character of God.

Peter is basically told by God, to step out from behind the **walls** of his cultural, social and religious barriers and engage with probably the person he'd least expect God to ask him to engage with. God then tells Peter "never presume to know where I may be at work in the world and whose heart and life, I am stirring and transforming at this very moment."

To his eternal credit, Peter does step out, as does Cornelius and in the process, they both build **bridges**.

Today we have another radical story of an encounter with Roman Centurion (this time it's with Jesus) and **again** it reveals a God who breaks down the **walls** of cultural barriers. So these are big truths for our challenge.

**Which is why this morning, I want to take this exploration further and look at the whole *mindset* of Walls or Bridges.**

And I deliberately call it a mindset because I firmly believe this is what it is.

As I look at culture and the world today, what I essentially see, is the fruits of these two ways of seeing and being.

Let's begin with walls. **Walls** come in many shapes and sizes and I know that we need them to keep up the house and to protect us from the elements, But I'm talking about the walls around our hearts and minds. And what these walls do, is create barriers and create divisions. They exclude. They keep us closed in. They prevent us from seeing very far and they are pretty much always built on the shaky foundations of fear.

**Bridges** also come in many shapes and sizes but have a completely different function.

Bridges build a connecting path across a chasm. They help us to reach landscapes previously unreachable. They connect what is disconnected and they enable engagement to take place where previously there was none. And only in engagement can transformation occur.

**And no-one shows us the deep truth of this more than the one we follow.**

Jesus was a bridge builder par excellence. He tirelessly and courageously took enormous risks to build bridges between cultural, social and religious divides. There was no cultural chasm or human disconnect, too big for Jesus. His entire ministry was dedicated to breaking down the dividing walls of hostility. To God and to each other. And he took this commitment all the way to the Cross.

## So how can we build bridges and what do these bridges look like?

Because it's not just about us building bridges. A big truth I want to bring out today, is how we can recognise the bridges that are **already in place**. Spiritual pathways that are already present, built by God. **How do we recognise them?**

**Let's look at today's encounter, and ask where do we see this going on?**

**People building bridges and seeing the bridges that are already in place?**

**How does this speak to us today?**

**The 2 central characters in this, are The Roman Centurion and Jesus.**

And let's recognise straightaway, that however big we think the chasms between faith and culture are for us today, they are nothing compared to a Roman occupying oppressor reaching out to a Jewish rabbi. Try as we might, we'll never fully grasp this. In fact, it's so huge that even though the Centurion is reaching out to Jesus, he feels that he needs other people to create the pathways for engagement. Because he asks the Jewish elders if they will go and ask Jesus to come.

So the elders go to Jesus and say **"please come, this Roman is a good man who loves our nation and even built synagogues out of his own pocket"**. And Jesus agrees to come with them to the Centurions house.

**BUT LET'S JUST PAUSE THERE AND ASK ... WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON.**

The Jewish elders are the bridge builders. Creating pathways to Jesus. But there's already a spiritual bridge in place that creates the opportunity for engagement. What is this bridge?

Well it's the goodness of the Centurion. And I'm not just talking about the fact that he loves their nation and built synagogues. In fact, I don't think that's the main reason Jesus responds.

**Think about it. Why is the Centurion asking for Jesus to come? Because it's not for him.**

He wants Jesus to heal his *slave* who is seriously ill, to the point of death.

Again, it's hard to grasp the full enormity of what's taking place here. The slave represents the Nobodies of the world. The dispensable, the very least of the least.

AND YET, this Roman Captain clearly loves and cares for him. This wouldn't have been lost on Jesus

**Jesus, of all people, would have recognised this deep spirit of love and compassion.**

Where in scripture, do we ever see Jesus NOT respond to the spirit of love, compassion and compassion? **"Do this for the least of My brothers and sisters, and you're doing it for me."** said Jesus. And it's this, that I believe, Jesus is really responding to. This is the spiritual bridge already present.

**But there is another layer in this encounter.**

Before Jesus even gets to his house the Centurion sends out his friends to Jesus to tell him **"Don't trouble yourself, sir I'm not important enough for you to come into my house—Just give the order, please, and I know my servant will recover"** And we see the response of Jesus to this. He's truly amazed. He turns to the crowds and says ... **"Truly I have never found faith like this anywhere, even in all of Israel!"**

Now just to get a sense of how these words would have stunned the Jewish crowd listening. It would be a bit like me standing here this morning and saying to you guys ... *"Listen I met a God fearing Muslim the other day, who truly had the spirit of Christ in him, and I haven't witnessed faith like this in the whole of Christianity.* I'm guessing this would trigger a few emails.

But that's the level of 'radical' that's taking place here.

The we see what happens next. The friends return to the house and the slave is healed. Jesus hasn't even been to see the man but the Centurion's simple and humble faith, has brought about a healing. Distance is no barrier to the healing power of Christ.

**Now this is powerful stuff, so how can this speak to us today in our challenge of how we build bridges and see the bridges already there?**

Well one of the first questions I ask myself is this ... who is my equivalent of the Roman Centurion? Who's yours? The seemingly, unlikely person outside of our own cultural, religious, social paradigms, and yet displays the Christ qualities of compassion, goodness and love.

**And how do we respond to this?**

Do I, do you, respond like Jesus and walk towards the Spirit of love wherever we see it? Even if it's outside the walls of our own paradigms and comfort zones.

**Do we have eyes open enough, to recognise these bridges that already exist in culture, for what they are?** These are opportunities for engagement. Spiritual pathways that are just waiting for us to walk across them to bring connection and encounter.

We all know that the Christ qualities of love, care compassion and goodness will always break down the walls and barriers that divide. Be they cultural, religious or social.

The Spirit of Christ will always heal, reconcile and build the spiritual bridges.

The Spirit of Christ will always transcend distance and barriers.

**AND I WANT TO TELL A STORY NOW THAT FOR ME, POWERFULLY ILLUSTRATES THE DIFFERENCE A WALLS OR BRIDGES MINDSET CAN MAKE, TO FAITH IN CULTURE.**

Last week Gareth mentioned the band U2 and bear with me as I talk about them again because something very interesting has happened to me since I saw them last week.

I'm not a U2 die hard. I've followed them over all the years and loved lots of their music, but I've never brought their albums and I'd never seen them live.

**But they deeply impacted me last week, and it's taken me on quite a spiritual journey.**

I've spent time going over their career and realising just how powerfully their Christian faith has fuelled all they've achieved and become. As Bono said in an interview "It's my faith in Christ that motives my desire to create music and to make a difference.

**Here's clip where lead singer Bono talks movingly about how his belief in Resurrection, has taken away his fear of death. Resurrection is when death died**

**BONO VIDEO CLIP - <https://youtu.be/y-UtNhbq7wc>**

**So what can the story of U2 tell us, about the difference, a Walls or Bridges mindset can make?**

Well back in 1981, just as they were beginning to make it big (especially in America) the band had a bit of a crisis. Bono tells the story of how he and the guitarist Edge, were attending a church in Dublin called Shalom Church. Bono said that the lead pastor had a real gift for opening up the scriptures, and that both he and the Edge loved the scriptures. Bono said that at first the church leaders welcomed them and said 'we love you just as you are'. But then after while they began to suggest that being in a rock band was a distraction from the real deal of being Christian. That they could serve God better in more traditional Christian ways.

Bono and the Edge became so convicted of this, that they actually went to their manager Paul McGuinness and told him they were leaving the band and not doing their next American tour.

And McGuinness said to them “really, and has God also explained to you, how you’re going to pay all the enormous legal fees for broken contracts?” So, Bono said we had a quick re-think and then said, “ok we’ll do just one more tour’.

**But it was on this tour that Bono said, they had a bit of a revelation.**

They wrote some of their best and most inspiring songs, and it began to dawn on them that actually...

- THIS is how they could best serve God with the giftings God had given them.
- THIS was the way they could build bridges - break down walls and barriers, create pathways - communicate the message of Christ best.

Rock and Roll wasn’t a distraction, it was the medium they were meant to pursue.

**So here’s the truth and the lesson I take from this.**

For close on 40 years U2 have sold an estimated 150 million albums.

They are without question the most active live band of that stature over these years, so they’ve played to countless millions across the entire planet.

There are websites dedicated to exploring how many of their songs have biblical themes and verses from scripture in some way shape or form. This means that for 40 years, millions of people have been exposed to - and sang along to - words of scripture and biblical themes that explore the deep yearning of the human condition to fill the holes in our souls.

Songs exploring the hope contained in the way and truth of Jesus Christ.

**Bono also helped start the ‘One Movement.’** An international, non-profit, organisation that fights extreme poverty and preventable disease. He’s worked tirelessly to raise public awareness – to pressurise and persuade political leaders to support policies and programs that saves lives and gives a future to the least of our brothers and sisters.

He actively campaigned with Bob Geldof in the influential **Drop the Debt** movement.

As a band U2 have courageously taken risks and dared greatly, in an industry not exactly known for its spiritual depth and desire for justice.

**SO HERE A FEW QUESTIONS TO PONDER ABOUT FAITH IN CULTURE.**

- **How many bridges of love, care, compassion and goodness have been built in all of these endeavours?**
- **How many walls have been broken down, so that lives have been touched and healed, across race, culture and creed?**
- **How many times, have they shown that the Spirit of Christ can transcend distance and all barriers of the human condition?**

**As one of their website creator fans put it...**

*“U2 can safely be described as one of the few mainstream bands that have evoked intense spiritual sentiments in their songs whilst never coming across as preachy or zealous.*

*Although much of the imagery in their work has been drawn from Jewish and Christian texts, they have rarely appealed to a sectarian mindset.*

*Instead they have evoked a view of the divine that has struck a chord with people of different cultures, race and creed.*

*My own spiritual and religious state owes its very existence to U2.”*

Given the millions of people they’ve reached through their music, how many times has this story been replicated in someone else’s life?

The way they've impacted me this week, confirms this very point.

**And YET...** NONE of this would have been possible – none of this kingdom fruit would have happened – if they'd listened to their church and succumbed to the mistaken belief that being in a rock and roll band was a distraction from God and not what it means to be fully Christian.

**The church had a walls and barriers mindset.**

**The very young U2 had a bridgebuilders mindset.**

Where else in the world is the Spirit of Christ at work, but we just need to look a little harder to recognise it?

**Let me bring this altogether, by giving a few thoughts and suggestions on how we can integrate these truths into our lives.**

- **Firstly, cultivate a bridge building mindset.**

We can do this, by listening closely to our thoughts and our words.

Do they reveal a tendency to think in terms of barriers and walls?

Do we use words like *'us'* and *'them'* – *'Christian - 'Secular'*

Because these tend cultivate a mindset that shuts out the possibility of God working in unlikely people – like Roman oppressors.

- **Instead, look out for- and be open to - 'bridge-moments'.**

**Learn to recognise where God may be more present than you think.**

When someone speaks or acts in ways that show they have a depth of love, compassion or spirituality or creativity, that can only come from God... See this as an opportunity to create pathways. **And then** like Jesus, respond by walking towards the place where you see the Spirit of love clearly present.

- **"Be all things, to all people, by all means possible, for the saving message of the Gospel."**

And always remember, that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate bridgebuilder blowing where it wants to blow, igniting and inspire whoever it wants to ignite and inspire. And distance and cultural paradigms are no barrier to the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

**I want to respond, on a personal level by showing the full version of the Christmas song and video that we released this week.**

This song and video is really my way of putting into practise all I've spoken about today. My attempt to create pathways - build bridges and hopefully strike a chord with bridges that already exist in people's hearts.

I deliberately wrote the lyrics to be all about Christmas and the Spirit of Christ, without being so overtly 'Christian' that many people would just instinctively put up their barriers and not listen. I wanted people to be singing and celebrating the true meaning of Christmas and the birth of the Prince of peace.

I wanted do what St Paul said he was always prepared to do.

**"I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means  
I might share the saving message of the Gospel.**

It may work it may not, but we live in times when we have to take some risks, be creative and trust the Spirit will do the rest.