

## ON NOT BUILDING WALLS<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 July 2021**

In 1914, the American poet, Robert Frost, published a collection of poems called *North of Boston*. When he wrote the poems, he was living on his farm in Derry,<sup>2</sup> New Hampshire, which is now a museum in his honour. Settled by Scots-Irish families in 1719, the town was the first place in the United States to grow potatoes. The fields are marked out by traditional drystone walls. In the winter, the ground freezes, thrusting some of the stones upward and causing parts of the walls to fall. Drystone walls were also subject to damage by hunters, who broke them in pursuit of game. Frost's 1914 collection contained his famous poem, "Mending Wall". The poem recounts the annual spring ritual in which two neighbours survey their common boundary and repair the wall where necessary. You can see its full text, and a photo of Frost sitting on a drystone wall, in the Order of Service.

The poem begins with a declaration that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall", either nature or humans. Frost wonders whether the wall is even necessary:

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 his pines, I tell him.

To which his neighbour replies, "Good fences make good neighbours". But Frost is still sceptical; he says:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.

Frost's poem is somewhat enigmatic. We assume that he is the narrator and is expressing his own views. It is not that he rejects walls altogether, it is that he worries about them.<sup>3</sup>

I want to talk to you about walls. Walls are important; at the very least they keep roofs up. That may sound trite, but you only need an earthquake to demonstrate how important it is that a roof stay where it should. They also have two other important functions: they keep things in and they keep them out.

Let's start with our reading from 2 Samuel 7. In an earlier part of the story, the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines. The Ark was the container in which the tablets of the Ten Commandments were stored and was thus the symbol of the presence of God. It was a supremely sacred object and its capture was not only humiliating for the Israelites, it symbolised God's departure from them. It was ultimately recovered and, in Chapter 6, David brings it up to Jerusalem, as we heard last week.

---

<sup>1</sup> Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:21-38; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

<sup>2</sup> Frost lived there from 1900 to 1911. His neighbour, who features in the poem, was Napoleon Guay, [Mending Wall - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Robert Frost: "Mending Wall" by Austin Allen | Poetry Foundation](#)

If the Lord's presence was symbolised by the Ark, its arrival elevated the importance of Jerusalem as the national capital. Previously the Ark had moved from place to place; God moved amongst God's people. If the Ark became stationary in Jerusalem, the people must come to God.

Thus, the decision to move the Ark to Jerusalem and to build a temple to house it operated both to keep God in and to regulate people's access to God, that is, to set the terms on which they could come in. This was wall building and gate keeping on a grand scale. It matters little that David did not get to build his temple. Solomon, his son, did so on the same arguments.

That temple, and its successors, stood on a mountain in the middle of the city. It must come to us as no surprise that the land on which it was built remains one of the most hotly contested religious sites in the world. Now occupied by Islamic buildings, it is a flash point in the city. The wall building and gate keeping have not departed from this site.

What a difference when we turn to this morning's gospel! Jesus is so exposed that he is regularly mobbed. Today's world would have him surrounded by minders who would ensure a more orderly and limited access to the great teacher. Jesus himself felt the problems that his notoriety caused. On occasions, he was forced to retreat to some quiet place where he could recharge himself. If limited access has problems, so, we might conclude, does unlimited access.

In our reading from Ephesians Paul notes how religions create rules. In one sense, that is part of what they are supposed to do. It hardly makes sense to have a religion without any rules. Inevitably, however, those rules create walls. That is to say, some walls are proper, necessary and useful. Others, however, are quite different. In his Ephesians letter, Paul is talking about a form of unnecessary and useless wall. The question that troubled the early church was whether or not converts had to become Jews in order to become Christians. This seems a rather silly question to us. But it was important in the New Testament context. Jesus was a Jew, as were his first disciples. Not only that, the theological basis of his ministry was strictly Jewish. His concept of God, his religious tradition, was Jewish and quite different from that of the Greco-Roman world in which the new gospel was to be proclaimed. New converts could not avoid entering this theological world. But must they also enter the cultural world of Jewish religious practice, including circumcision and the various ritual purity laws?

If they came in a bundle, Christianity would join the other Jewish sects of the time. It could never become the world religion that Paul spearheaded. If they were separated, a different future awaited. This is the point that Paul was making. If some walls are necessary and useful, others are unnecessary and destructive.

It is a fundamental question as to whether walls are there to keep in or to keep out. The infamous Berlin wall was designed to keep in those who wished to go out. The equally infamous wall in Israel is designed to keep out those who wish to get in. But their effects are greater than their intentions. The Berlin wall limited those who did not want to leave as well as those who did. The Israeli wall keeps those inside from meeting those outside. A new wall has been built in Hungary to keep out refugees, reinforcing the fears of the citizens. The border wall between the USA and Mexico was, ironically begun in the same year as the Berlin wall was demolished. Extended by the Trump administration, it too affects those on each side as its political exploitation shows.

The last 18 months have made us aware of walls. We live in a “fortress Australia” that protects those of us living here but exposes our fellow citizens who want to return to safety. The price of our safety may also be our separation from our loved ones who live overseas. We are confined to our homes both to protect us from others and them from us. Both within and without those domestic walls, lives are damaged.

It goes without saying that, as Paul demonstrates, walls do not need to be physical. They can be of any form that operates to separate people from each other. It is possible that non-physical walls are more effective than the physical. Social distinctions such as class, are very effective. Christianity has erected such non-physical walls quite often in its history: between the Eastern Church and the Western Church; between Catholics and Protestants, between various social groups. We have become so expert in identifying so-called “sinners” and excluding them that we might feel that the history of the Christian Church has been more about building walls than throwing them down.

But, if, as Paul suggests, we must not pay attention to visible and external signs as markers of acceptability to God and inclusion in the Body of Christ, how do we know who is in or out? Who is one of “us” and who is not? But that is not the right question. Why should knowing this concern us? Perhaps this judgement is not ours to make. The question for us is how we can remove such distinctions.

What can we say? If walls are necessary in some cases and not in others, it behoves us to think very carefully about our walls. In his Ephesians letter Paul talks about breaching the wall of separation and creating unity, so we might consider that this is the standard to be applied in evaluating our walls.

So [Christ] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.<sup>4</sup>

Let anyone with ears listen!<sup>5</sup>

#### MENDING WALL

Robert Frost

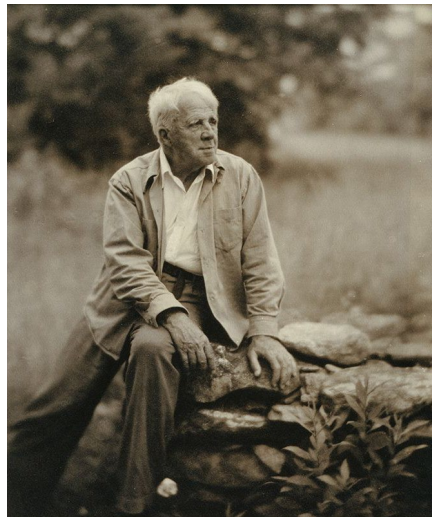
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:17-18

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:15

And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
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 his 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? Isn't it  
Where there are cows?  
But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me~  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'<sup>6</sup>



Robert Frost, 1955  
Image by Clara Sipprell, National Portrait Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert Frost, 'Mending Wall', <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/frost-mending.html>

