May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

When the author of the letter to the Ephesians wrote to Ephesus nearly two thousand years ago he did nothing out of the ordinary for his time – letters had long been a normal way of communicating although costly and time consuming, and were for ordinary people perhaps much more a matter of course than they are for our contemporaries today. We send our writings via email when they are of such a length and prefer to type them out on a computer instead of torturing others with our handwriting.

And yet, we do write real letters when we have something very personal on our mind or want to tell someone something so important that it matters to us to avoid having our message flicker across some strange monitor where it will probably be deleted before it has actually reached the heart and mind of the addressee.

It is important to us that the recipient takes time to sit down and read our message and if we are lucky does not only read what we want to say once. Because we are always showing something of ourselves, we are exposing our thoughts and feelings. For letters transmit only our language in a one-dimensional way – there is no voice, no facial expression. The entire focus is on the text. That is why letters take time – not only when they are produced but also in sending them. It is not enough to press a button – we have to put our pages in an envelope and find a postage stamp, go to a post-box and wait for the post to be picked up and …

Maybe that is why writing letters is no longer fashionable: for in our medial society thoughts and ideas are designed to be quick and above all witty. The slow and arduous rhythm of speech, requiring several readings, which the letters – and those of the New Testament are especially complicated examples – require of us, makes it difficult and bothersome for us to focus on and listen to what the writer wants to say to us. The authors of the Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters went to a great effort to find the right words, and every now and then one catches a glimpse through the text
of how seriously they understood their job to speak about their faith and to wrestle with its truth.

But why did the texts turn out to be so long? Perhaps we should first consider what Blaise Pascal is supposed to have written: “Please excuse the long letter, I had no time to write a shorter one.” Our text for today is also quite detailed for there it is written:

“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands — that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

[Italics in the original.] (Translation: New King James Version; www.Biblegateway.com)

Is it appropriate to read such a text out loud? Don’t these lines fly by us like white noise?

Does what was written down so long ago reach our hearts and minds? And which words are those that we remember?

Perhaps the following:

Without God’s encouragement and the orientation towards him we human beings are without rights and uprooted, wandering around like the stateless, we remain excluded
as strangers, are not tolerated and have no right to stay anywhere. It is a restless and dangerous existence which lacks a minimum of safety and security. Now however, through Jesus Christ we are near, taken into an alliance and a family, brothers and sisters. How must the writer of this epistle have struggled with his words long ago, so that not one grain of this unbelievable existential change which God has given us humans, be lost through weak language! Do we feel that? Are we so close to each other in the same way as people who live at the same place are? Or are these words of encouragement simply for show and not something we can really comprehend? It’s about reconciliation and peace between us Christians.

Nothing else, so we hear, can overcome the strangeness and distance between us, but Jesus Christ who broke through and tore down the fence between us and God. There is nothing more that stands between us, nothing that separates us.

Everything that we perceive as an obstacle is of our own making. It is not what Jesus wants and is not the result of his actions for he is our peace, he is our common and sole access to the Father. We do not each of us have our own access to God with regard to our denomination and tradition.

There is only one common way to God – through Him. And as different as we may be: this one way makes us into fellow lodgers, family members, human beings with human rights – and for that reason with a secure future and a stable existence. This has to be read more than once, it takes time and is a letter that is already hard to digest.

Theodor Fontane commented long ago: “Letter writing is like a storm brewing, there’s a lot of thunder and lightning but no rain.” It’s the same way here. What it was all about in these letters bursts through like a flash at the end of the first century. And it is still true today. For it seems that the times have hardly changed. At those times horizons were widening. People were experiencing a new form of cosmopolitan thinking that had not been there before. Areas of trade were growing and growing and with increasing success in trade the gap between the rich and the poor grew. Contemporary philosophy focussed on the happiness of the individual. Religion was becoming more urban and religiousness more private. One distanced oneself from others and jeopardized the unity and closeness which was established through Jesus Christ.
An age-old letter: It is about peace and reconciliation and a shared house. This letter is to all of us. It is clearly written to us that we cannot negotiate between us unity and closeness. These are not the results of a compromise. God’s nearness, it says here, will only then be granted to us when we accept with all our heart that Jesus Christ is our peace.

Let us read this again and again and take it to heart.

For the peace of God, which is greater than whatever we can imagine, shall keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen