



**A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral,
preached on Sunday 27 September by the Reverend
Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.**

Readings: Ezekiel 37.15-end and 1 John 2.22-end.

Two sticks, Tape and Some Glue

Duck Tape® and superglue are surely the solution to all of life's problems.

Has the arm fallen off of your glasses? Duck Tape. Did you accidentally knock your partner's favourite magnet off the fridge door again? Superglue. Is the engine dangling off your aeroplane just before take-off? Duck Tape. Did you accidentally break another fridge magnet while trying to mend the first? More superglue. Is the Psalter in your stall falling apart? Duck Tape. Has the United Monarchy of Saul, Ish-boheth, David, Solomon, and briefly Rehoboam split into a northern kingdom of Israel and a southern kingdom of Judah? Maybe that one's superglue.

Although, as it happens, God proposed a slightly different solution. Namely, two sticks. Take one stick, the Prophet Ezekiel is told, and write upon it 'For Judah'. Take another stick and write upon it 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim)'. 'Join them together into one, so that they may become one in your hand'. Put the two sticks together, make them one, Bob's your uncle. That sounds even easier than tape or superglue.

In our first reading, something which has been bitterly broken apart is brought back together in unity. This is one of the deepest longings we can carry around with us, because we can spend quite a lot of our lives trying to hold things together. We try to hold our workplaces together, our families together, friendships together, churches together, communities together. Sometimes, we try desperately to hold ourselves together. We mend, we patch, we reconcile, we forgive, we say sorry, we try again. Occasionally, our efforts are successful. But sometimes, however, it doesn't matter how much superglue we apply, it will still fall apart. And sometimes, the most loving and healthy action is to let go.

It is almost deceptively simple, therefore, to read of Ezekiel standing there with these two sticks in his hand, because the division they represent was anything but simple. Division rarely comes without complications. Division has history; division has grievances and different perspectives. It remembers the forgotten and its scars. Yet, into all of that complexity, God offers an extraordinary promise: *'I will make them one nation [...] never again shall they be divided [...] they shall all have one shepherd [...] my dwelling-place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'*.

Our God is in the business of putting things back together. Not because the things that divide us are meaningless, nor because disagreement is unreal, nor because reconciliation is easy. But because division does not have to have the final word. We need to hear that because we live in a world which is remarkably good at pulling things apart. We divide ourselves into tribes. We become suspicious of those who think differently, vote differently, worship differently, speak differently, love differently, or live differently. At times, we may even relish in our divisions and find comfort in knowing who is on our side and who isn't.

However, the counter-cultural Christian vision is one of stubborn reconciliation at a humanity-wide level. One people, one shepherd, one God dwelling among us. The Scriptures are not naïve about any of this. We've heard, this afternoon, the voice of the psalmist in pain. *'My soul hath long dwelt among them that are enemies unto peace. I labour for peace, but when I speak thereof they make ready to battle'* (Psalm 120.5-6).

Peace can be labour. So too can reconciliation and forgiveness. Loving can be laborious. Sometimes, we can do everything within our power and discover that it is not enough. We speak peace while someone else prepares for battle. Sometimes an apology should not be accepted. Sometimes a relationship should not be repaired. Sometimes the two sticks must remain as two sticks.

This is where our second lesson this afternoon perhaps becomes so important. The Johannine Epistler provides us with an alternative image through that powerfully evocative word, to abide. *'Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father'*.

The Christian vocation might not be to fix everything. We may desire to repair every broken thing, to reconcile every division, to have the answer, and ultimately hold everything together. Yet we cannot. We cannot ourselves always hold everything together. However, we can abide in the God who holds us together.

Here in this moment, in this office of Evensong, we are in our own way abiding. We hear the words which have been prayed generations before us. We allow the Scriptures to be heard in our hearts and minds. We raise one voice together. We praise God alongside the numerous company of saints. With the business of the world outside, we have space to discover that while we have been desperately trying to hold onto God, God has been holding onto us all this time.

The great promise of Ezekiel is not simply that God's people will dwell together; it is that God will dwell with them. God abides with us. In our divisions, in our failures, in the relationships we cannot mend, the questions we cannot answer, in the things we futilely wish we could put back together. God abides. This doesn't mean we stop labouring for peace; quite the opposite. We continue in the labour of forgiveness and reconciliation, but we do so trusting that the final reconciliation of all things does not depend upon us fallen humans. It depends upon God.

There are things in this life which we cannot mend, no matter how much Duck Tape or superglue we use. Sometimes we cannot repair, nor heal, nor answer, nor keep. Eventually, even mortal life itself is something that we cannot hold onto forever. When all else is stripped away, our prayer may not be that we fix all things or become the hinge holding all things together. Instead, our prayer is simply: abide. When all other helpers fail, and comforts flee; when change and decay in all around we see; when there is nothing for us to mend, nothing for us to hold together, nothing left for us to do – then we earnestly pray, 'in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me'.

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