

TRUE RECONCILIATION IS OUR HOPE

Ezekiel 17. 22-24

2 Corinthians 5. 6-10, 14-19

Mark 4. 26-34

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

When we were younger (so much younger than today), we perhaps naively thought that so long as we were sincere and well-intentioned, even if we made mistakes, we could avoid making any enemies. But then one day we woke up and suddenly realised that, as it turns out, we now have a small list of folks with whom we are not on the best of terms. With some of these people, a chance encounter at the supermarket creates awkwardness; and with others, chance meetings are ugly reminders of how deep the rupture is.

It happens. Rifts and gaps open up between people for all kinds of reasons. Those who once complimented us now criticise; and those who once thought well of us could scarcely be less charitable now.

Over the past few weeks, our lectionary has included some texts from St Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians that are difficult to read at times. Paul knew what it felt like to be criticised and to be rejected. He had had a good experience in the city of Corinth. The church he had planted there was filled with people who were dear to his heart; and although the Corinthians were a feisty group burdened with problems, Paul loved them and, even after he left Corinth, he prayed for them every day.

So we can imagine how much it must have hurt Paul to learn that in Corinth, his reputation had been shattered. After his departure from that city, some critics came

to town and called Paul into question. They impugned Paul's credentials, claiming he had no right to call himself an apostle. They alleged that Paul was a penny-pincher and a charlatan whose motives were impure and whose so-called 'gospel' was just hogwash and heresy.

Therefore in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul finds that he has to defend himself. At the conclusion of this fifth chapter, Paul's desire to clear his name combines with his effort to repeat the true gospel, resulting in a sublime passage of great power. The centrepiece of the passage is reconciliation. By grace alone and because of our Lord, God has reconciled us to himself.

The result of this cosmic reconciliation is that we now look at everything differently. We look at everything and everyone through the lens of reconciliation. We are *ambassadors* of reconciliation as we call others to believe in Jesus and to find themselves in a good relationship with God. But it is not just about the vertical dimension between God and us. Being caught up in God's salvation changes everything on the human, horizontal plane, too.

'Once upon a time', Paul writes (and I am paraphrasing), 'we regarded Christ only from a human point of view; and when we did, we didn't think much of him. But now we see our Lord and everyone in a divine perspective and it changes everything.' In the Greek, Paul talks about regarding Jesus and others *kata sarx*, which literally means 'according to the flesh'. If we look at Christ as no more than just another flesh-and-blood human being among the billions of other flesh-and-blood people who populate this globe, then there is nothing remarkable about him. If our Lord is only human, then to worship him is idolatry. But Jesus is also the Son of God, so we are right to worship him. You cannot look at Christ only according to his human side.

Furthermore, Paul makes a parallel between looking at our Lord in a complete way and looking at other fellow humans in a complete way. But none of us is divine; so what is the parallel here? Well, the parallel, according to Paul, is that because we are all 'in Christ', we are more than just humans, too; there is more to us than meets the eye.

We are the bearers of God's saving grace, with the Holy Spirit living inside us. Since this is true, we cannot presume that broken relationships can be shrugged off and considered to be without consequence. No! We Christians are caught up in the grip of God's cosmic reconciliation in Christ. Jesus died so that fractured relationships, dysfunctional families, lost friendships and ruptured social circles could be restored.

From a purely human point of view, it is easy to see alienation among people and to say 'that's just the way life goes'. One friend says the wrong thing to another and the friendship is over. Romances break up; friends drift apart. In congregations, as in corporations, people come and people go. Some people like each other, and some people can't stand each other. The person to whom we were once close is now the one we cross the street just to avoid. It happens all the time. It's the same all over.

But the gospel screams God's thunderous 'No!' to that kind of casual dismissal of alienation. Paul knew that in his own lifetime he had gone from being God's number one enemy to God's beloved apostle. Even years later, Paul no doubt sometimes awoke in the dead of night, cold sweat running down his forehead, because of the nightmares in which he remembered the Christians he had run through with a sword, the dear women he had dragged away by their hair, and that look on St Stephen's face just before the last stone hit his forehead and took his life. Paul knew from his own experience that reconciling former enemies is the main reason why Christ died. Paul was a living example of that reconciliation.

Theologian Miroslav Volf has written extensively on the theme of reconciliation, and he points out that it is not just ‘impersonal forces’ of evil that are done away with in God’s reconciliation of all things. It is not just the entire creation, broadly conceived, which gets reconciled with its God. No, Volf says, it has to be more specific than that. Before we can all dwell happily together in the peace of God’s kingdom, there needs to be real reconciliation between earthly enemies. Perpetrators and victims must embrace. Those who have lived in conflict need to have that conflict put away if there is to be *shalom*. It’s not just the lion and the lamb that need to learn to curl up next to one another,¹ but all of us who have lived as the human equivalents of lambs and lions in how we have treated each other. There can be no peace in God’s kingdom so long as there is anyone there who would just as soon cross over to the other side of the street in order to avoid someone.

This perfect reconciliation in God’s kingdom is part of the Christian hope. It is one of the blessings that awaits us in heaven. In the meantime, we are called to consider afresh this important issue of reconciliation. On this earth, it is true that we may never be fully reconciled with everyone. There are many reasons for that. Sometimes it is sinful stubbornness which blocks the fixing of things. In other situations, it may appear that nothing can be done, since there is too much hurt, and any efforts that we make to be kind will be rebuffed. There are times when there is not a blessed thing we can do to repair what has been broken in life; but we still have an obligation to attempt to repair relationships when we can.

If there are hurts, wounds or rifts that we cannot heal for the time being, we will do well to remember Paul’s message of hope to the Corinthians. *There is* a reconciliation, a wholeness, and a peace which endures. It is a peace which we need to hold onto, especially in those messy moments and situations in our lives. Amen.

¹ Cf. Isaiah 11. 1-9.