

Trinity 12 2016 - Reconciliation

Jeremiah 23 vv 23-29 p783, Psalm 82, Hebrews 11 v29 – 12 v3 p1210, Luke 12 vv 49-56 p1046

II Corinthians 5: ¹⁷ Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

¹⁸ And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;

¹⁹ To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

²⁰ Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

²¹ For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

I've been watching some television documentaries about the Battle of the Somme which took place in Picardy 100 years ago. Terrible times: the wanton slaughter, the terrible weapons and pitiless tactics, the mud, the rats, the lice, the ruthless execution of the shell shocked, the million casualties when you count the dead and wounded of both sides. I felt for the horses, too, used in cavalry charges and to haul the heavy weapons. They had no choice as to whether or not to be there, the same as many of the men, given that conscription had already been introduced in 1916. Apart from praying, *Give peace in our time, O Lord. Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God*, I could only think that there must surely have been a better way of settling the differences between the governments of Britain and her allies and of Germany and her allies than the murder of millions of people and the destruction of productive farmland, beautiful landscape and people's homes and places of business. There must surely be a better way of settling our differences.

I have been asked to preach on reconciliation. So, here goes. The divisions between people, the breakdown of relationships, the wars and crimes, the acts of dishonesty and violence, selfishness and greed, the indifference to human need and suffering, all of them, go back to our rejection of God. It is because we are alienated from God that we are alienated from one another. If we believed God it would be counted to us for righteousness and we would freely obey His commandments. Because we do not have faith in God, we do not trust Him for our lives. We disobey His commandments and go our own way. *The wages of sin is death*, graphically illustrated on the battlefields of the Somme. The human condition is hopeless because everyone of us is self-centred and, therefore, we follow too much devices of our own hearts, we offend against God's holy laws, we don't do what we should, we do do what we shouldn't and there is no health in us. That is the diagnosis of the human condition and, until we accept that diagnosis, we cannot begin the cure. *There is no health in us.*

But, thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders. Reconciliation starts with God. The cure for the human condition is Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man. *God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.* The Cross of Jesus deals with human sin once and for all. If we repent and believe, we are reconciled to God. We are no longer alienated from Him. Once we are no longer alienated from God, we are set free to keep His commandments, which are summarised in the commandments to love. One big division in biblical times was, of course, the one between Jews and Gentiles. St Paul says of Jesus, *For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us: Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the*

*law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were far off and to them that were nigh, For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father (Ephesians 2¹⁴⁻¹⁸). There is only one way to God, the One God Himself has provided, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Through faith in Him, we are one with God and therefore one with one another. The Church of God is, as the hymn says, *one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth*. St Paul again (Galatians 3²⁶⁻²⁸), *For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus*. And one more time, Paul says of Christians, *Ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Where there is neither Greek, nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all (Colossians 3⁹⁻¹¹)*. Paul reminds us what we are and tells us to live up to our status as the children of God, reconciled to Him and to one another. The Christian Church then is a fellowship of millions of people on earth and in heaven united to God and to one another in love, His love and ours, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*

The Church's task then is set out for us in Matthew 28 after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead: ¹⁸ *And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.*

¹⁹ *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:*

²⁰ *Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.*

Through faith, and only through faith, the world can be reconciled to God. Once reconciled to God, human beings will be reconciled to one another. No longer alienated from God, men, women and children cease to be alienated from one another. They are free to obey God's commandments, God's commandments summarised in the words *love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself*. Set free from sin and the fear of death, Christ having overcome the power of the Devil, Christ having redeemed us and atoned for us and offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, we are free to live unselfcentredly, unselfishly, trusting God to meet our needs, thankful for everything He gives to us, and generously sharing what we have with other people. *All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation*. So our task, the task of the Church, is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole world so that the world may be reconciled to God and its peoples be reconciled to one another. No more war, crime, violence or dishonesty, no more indifference to human suffering and need, no more ruthless exploitation of what God has created for our own selfish ends. This *ministry of reconciliation* might mean being a missionary like Paul. It very likely means sharing our faith with our friends and family. It certainly means living as the children of God. As individuals, our lives should show our neighbours what it means to be a Christian, reconciled to God and to one

another. The life of the Church ought to be a model of Christianity, a witness to the world of what God wants for us – that the whole human race should be *one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth*. The Church doesn't exist for itself. We are the light of the world, the salt of the earth and the leaven which enables the lifeless dough of unredeemed humanity to rise and fulfil itself in renewed communion with the Bread of Life.

Two problems with this vision, however. First is that the Church is often very poor at manifesting itself as *one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth*. We are divided into denominations. We find it hard to resolve our differences within denominations. Matters of principle, of truth and falsehood, are at stake in the Church today as they were in Jeremiah's time. Standing up for truth and justice, as God requires of us in the psalm, may force us to stand up to the indifferent and the downright evil. Otherwise we risk becoming complicit by complacency. Human sexuality and female clergy are two issues currently vexing the Anglican communion and threatening our unity and even our love for one another. How can we speak what we believe to be the truth in love? Individual congregations are not always very good at dealing with disagreements and conflicts and hurt feelings. People drop out because they feel uncared for or march out in a huff because they disagree with the direction their church is taking. Alienation within the Church can sometimes be the worst kind of alienation. The issues matter so much to us. If we believe that we are bearing witness to the truth, it is only too easy to think that people who disagree with us must be stupid or wicked. If we believe we are trying to do God's work, it is easy to assume that anyone who opposes us is working for the devil. Precisely because we feel guilty about quarrelling, we may find it hard to disagree politely with other Christians. Given the tradition of Christian martyrs yielding their lives for the truth, we may feel obliged to imitate their unwillingness to compromise at whatever cost to themselves on occasions when compromise is precisely the approach which wisdom would indicate, the beginning of wisdom, remember, being the fear of the LORD. As St Paul says, *the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would* (Galatians 5¹⁷).

With those sombre words, we'll move onto the other difficulty standing in the way of our ministry of reconciliation. It is the one Jesus is teaching us about in the Gospel. Jesus Himself creates division. You are for Him or you are against Him. Those who are against Him (the world) can be expected to treat those who are for Him (the Church) in the same way as they treated Him. Jesus says, *Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also* (John 15²⁰). Ironically, our ministry of reconciliation may require of us a willingness to line up with all those martyrs listed in our New Testament reading and all that great cloud of witnesses who have looked only to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

That's all we can do. Look to Jesus. He has conquered sin and reconciled us to God. It is in our openness to Him that we will heal our divisions within the Church. It is in our faithfulness to Him that we will bear witness to the world and each one of us will take his or her own part in God's mission to reconcile the world to Himself. It all depends on Him, our weak, but real, faithfulness to Him and His infinite and unwavering faithfulness to us.