



Lenten Bible Study 2016

Reconciliation

Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's trespasses against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Cor.5.17-19.

'The message of reconciliation' was BACI's unanimous choice of subject for our Lenten Bible Study theme this year. The theme has been a constant one in church discourse for many years. Recently, both the need and the hope for reconciliation – within and between churches, between religions and between races, cultures and continents, rich and poor, male and female, liberal and conservative – has captured more and more of our attention. New leadership in major churches, Francis in Rome, Justin Welby in Canterbury, and now Michael Curry in The Episcopal Church, has increased our hope, offered new inspiration. But the work of reconciliation has to be done at the grass roots. Without us and the people around us, especially in our relationships with those we see as 'different' or fear as 'alien', it will not come about.

We have been inspired by the ACC's work on the Indaba process and its current *Bible in the Life of the Church* Lenten studies on the same reconciliation theme, and we share some of the same readings. But the BACI studies have been composed by a Church of Ireland team, hailing from both North and South, for Church of Ireland parishes. We hope it will help your ministry of reconciliation – both in your own thinking and prayer life and in your work and sharing beyond your immediate circle and your comfort zone.

Reconciliation is a major theme of Archbishop Justin Welby's leadership of the Anglican Communion. And it is not a new one for him. His thinking and his skills in the area go back to his time as a se-

nior oil executive in Nigeria; they developed 'under fire' (sometimes literally) when he was appointed to the international ministry team at Coventry Cathedral, taking responsibility for reconciliation work in Africa, where his earlier experience gave him considerable advantages.

Welby's thinking on the essential steps in reconciliation ministry may be helpful to us as we ponder biblical texts and our own calling in this area over the coming weeks. To help us remember them, he has chosen six words beginning with R.¹

The first is **RESEARCH**. We cannot hope to reconcile without understanding the issues – the roots of conflict, the needs that have been ignored, the history behind the animosity.

The second is **RELATE**. We do not reconcile *ideas* or officialdom; we hope to reconcile *people* – relating to people 'not because they are good, but because they are there'; relating to them as *ourselves*, vulnerable and imperfect as we are. Warm human relationship precedes reconciliation; and is its seed-bed.

The third is **RELIEVE**. From our research and through our relationships, we become aware of the socio-economic needs of those we seek to reconcile. Unless we seek to meet those needs, the relationship may be seen as empty of commitment.

The fourth is **RISK**. In international reconciliation ministry, there is commonly great personal risk – of injury, kidnapping, even murder. The only response, according to Welby, given that the risk is a calculated one, is 'trust in the sovereignty of God – a safety net stronger than any risk'. Without risk, even in the oil business, nothing can be accomplished. There is also the risk of misunderstanding, of attack from one's own 'side'. 'Why do you talk to bad people?' may be the question. 'Because the bad people are causing the trouble,' is the answer.

The fifth brings us to our key word, **RECONCILE**. Reconciliation is not easily achieved; it is no mere matter of statements or accords. It is where the rubber hits the road in issues of justice, forgiveness and restitution. It is a matter of the heart and of consequent action. It is a community process, not a simple event.

¹ We are indebted to Andrew Atherstone's *Archbishop Justin Welby*, DLT 2013, for this material.

Finally we come to **RESOURCE** - enabling communities to continue the process of reconciliation without assistance or monitoring from outside.

These six elements of reconciliation are not simply sequential – all will be part of the everyday work of reconciliation, but all are essential.

More essential than any one of them is the understanding that reconciliation is God's will for us and God's gift to us in Christ, if only we will accept it and become that promised 'new creation'.

But this does not mean that reconciliation is only for Christians. As Welby has said, 'God is too generous for that. His grace should overflow into the world around us,' and 'Christians should be the source of rivers of reconciliation flowing to the places of conflict and trauma around them,' from their families and workplaces to the entire experience of humankind.

William Olhausen and Ginnie Kennerley

These Bible Studies are presented on behalf of BACI by a team including Linda Chambers, Barbara Bergin, Earl Storey, Paul Houston, William Olhausen and Ginnie Kennerley

1. POWER AND SERVICE

Introduction

IN 2013 Pope Francis abandoned the stylised foot washing of episcopal feet in the Basilica of St John Lateran and went instead to a juvenile detention centre where he kissed the feet of inmates, regardless of gender or faith. He told the young people, 'This is a symbol, it is a sign. Washing feet means I am at your service'.

Today the Anglican Communion, through its members, is involved in reconciliation work in many parts of the world: with indigenous peoples in Australia and Canada; in South Africa, where Desmond Tutu is Patron of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation; in India, in work with Dalit (untouchable) communities; in Northern Ireland, through the Hard Gospel project, and so on. In all these reconciliation projects, it engages in a ministry of service.

There is also a need today for reconciliation **within** the Church. For instance, the Anglican Communion continues to be dangerously divided over its interpretation of Scripture in relation to issues of human sexuality. In the USA this has already resulted in a formal split. Other Anglican churches, including our own, are struggling to find a way to foster mutual respect between church members who differ on the issues.

This internal need for reconciliation is draining the energy needed to address the urgent needs in our world now, such as climate justice, homelessness, economic migration, the Syrian refugee crisis and our relationship with the wider Muslim community. Such challenges make our need for reconciliation within the church even more urgent.

Too often, we are more concerned with being 'right', than with humble service. But Jesus taught that those who wanted to lead must be servants of all. To set them an example, the night before he died, Jesus washed the feet of all his disciples, knowing one would betray him, another deny him, and nine others leave him to face torture and death alone.

Readings

Mark 10. 35 – 45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you...
³⁷ Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' ... ⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles ... their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

John 13: 1-17

13 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, ^[a] took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' ⁷ Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' ⁸ Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.' ¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me

Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

Notes

Mark.10.37. James' and John's response to Jesus' prediction of his death in the previous verses is to seek positions of power.

v.43. Servant = *diakonos*, from which we get deacon.

v.45. Jesus' death is the absolute antithesis of authority and privilege.

John.13.1. Passover occurs in March or April. In Jesus' time as many as 100,000 people would have traveled to Jerusalem for the festival.

v.2. Foot washing would normally have happened upon arrival, not during supper. What did Jesus wait?

v.5. To offer guests the opportunity to wash their feet was simply ordinary hospitality, necessary because of open sandals and dusty or muddy (or worse) roads. The host would provide water and, if wealthy, a slave to wash, but would not wash feet himself.

v.7 This is not about hygiene but about service.

v.8. Jesus has reversed what Peter sees as the natural order of things.

v.10. The word *you* is plural.

v.11. Jesus washes the feet of all, including Judas, even though he knows Judas will betray him.

Questions

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu said, "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land."

1. What might the churches of the Anglican Communion do to correct past mistakes in relation to power and service?
2. Should we, as a church, be more outspoken on the issues that affect the world today?
3. What would humble service look like within the structures of the Church ?
4. What are we going to do, as local churches and as individuals, to serve people in need, and be 'instruments of reconciliation'?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to live authentically humble lives.
Free us from our desire to be right, to be preferred,
and from our fear of being forgotten or ignored.
Give us strength and compassion to serve all your people, especially those whom we fear, or who might wish us harm.
And help us to be instruments of your reconciling love in the world.
Amen.

2. TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES

Introduction

‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’
(John 7:37-38).

AS READERS of the story of the **Samaritan Woman** (John 4:5–30) we are invited to share the experience of her life-changing encounter with Jesus. Through her story he is meeting us today and speaking to us in our own time and place, in the current circumstances of our lives, whatever they are. He is inviting us to meet him, accept him and be changed by him, like the Samaritan woman. He is challenging us as his disciples, to reach out to the ‘other’ in our society as he did.

BUT to let Jesus into our lives can be embarrassing. His light shows everything, lighting up areas we would rather keep in the dark. Before we can reach out to others with love we must be reconciled with God.

Risk is necessary if reconciliation is to be attempted. There is risk on both sides in this story. Jesus, a Jew, is approaching a woman who is ritually unclean because she is a Samaritan. (There was a long history of religious difference between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans had inter-married with the invading Assyrians, and drifted from Jewish religious teaching. In Jesus’ day, they were no longer accepted as members of ‘the people of God’, but classed as Gentiles and ‘unclean’.)

She is risking everything by speaking in public to a man who is not part of her family, and is also despised by her people as a Jew. Nevertheless He reached out to her with respect and understanding. After some initial resistance, she was open to receive his revelation. Jesus enters into a dialogue with her and she is transformed by her interaction with him. She becomes the first evangelist of the Church, bringing all her neighbours to meet Jesus, saying, ‘Could this be the Messiah?’ (Jn. 4.29)

Reading

John. 4. 5 – 26.

(On his way from Jerusalem to Galilee) ⁵ Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' ¹¹ The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' ¹³ Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' ¹⁵ The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' ¹⁷ The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' ¹⁹ The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' ²¹ Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' ²⁵ The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' ²⁶ Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Notes

Jesus left Judea to return home to Galilee, taking the direct route through Samaria, which Jews would normally avoid by going through the Jordan valley.

John 4.7-15. Jesus is weary, hot, tired, thirsty and hungry, sitting alone at the well waiting for his disciples to return with food, when the Samaritan woman comes to fill her water jar at noon. He takes the initiative at once addressing her as an equal and making himself vulnerable by asking her to 'give me a drink', and in this way opens the conversation between them. She is startled to be addressed by a Jew, since Jews would normally consider Samaritans untouchable. She is brusque in her response (v.9). Initially all that appears to draw the strangers together is physical thirst - Jesus for water to slake the thirst from his foot-slog in the heat of the day, and she for the water for her daily needs. But the conversation will grow into a profound experience for them both.

v.13. Jesus remains calm in the face of the impolite reply. He reaches out to her offering her 'living water', but she is having none of it! Once again her response is scornful (v.11), but her interest is aroused at the same time: 'Where do you get this living water?' A spark of faith has been ignited, but does not reach to the level of her consciousness. She is still thinking about the water for her physical needs. (v.15)

v.16-18. Now comes Jesus' direct challenge to her: he can see into all her past life and its failures. Yet he does not condemn her. As though to defend herself, she challenges him in return: Who is right about God, the Jews or the Samaritans? (v.20)

Her response is our response. We too, continue to argue and to challenge. Where and how should we worship? Surely we are right and you are wrong! But Jesus shows us, as he showed the Samaritan woman, how to transcend our arguments. True worship that is acceptable to God is 'in spirit and in truth', not dependent on the formulae or restrictions of any human authority.

But are we able to leave these on one side?

Questions

1. What stands in the way of our being reconciled with God and one another?
2. How does the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman show us principles for relating to those different from ourselves – in religious belief, moral convictions, community background, or socio-economic status?
3. What risks must we be willing to take to converse with such 'others' as equals?
4. What can we do to start transcending boundaries right away, accepting people who are different as equally children of God?

Prayer

Loving God,
You desire your people to be one as you are One.
Teach us that oneness in your likeness
is full of joy in diversity.
We ask this in your name,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

3. REACHING OUT TO THE OTHER

Introduction

OCCASIONALLY life has a way of frustrating us. Opportunities we long for may not come to pass. Or circumstances bring us into territory not of our choice, where things seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable. This is what happened to Paul and his companions in Acts 16:6-15.

This passage describes the various ways in which Paul and his followers were prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the gospel in Asia, a region they were familiar with and that was 'home' to them.

The passage continues with Paul receiving a request, in a dream, to leave his home territory to preach the gospel in Europe. Truly a call to move out of his comfort zone!

The description of how God first frustrates Paul's plans, then opens an unexpected door, illustrates that we can plan our course, but ultimately it is God who shows us the way.

To millions of people, especially outside Europe, Christianity appears to be a Western religion, foreign to their outlook and their national ethos. They naturally resent attempts to evangelise them, when we fail to respect the wisdom of their own culture.

Many of the early missionaries made this mistake, equating the gospel with their national churches or even the policies of their home countries. This gave the impression that the Christian gospel was an arm of Western colonialism, laden with the trappings of Western culture. And so other nations came to see Christianity as something alien, threatening to stifle their national character.

As a result some people now regard the attempt to share the gospel with people of other faiths as being against the spirit of Christ. They may drop all claims about the uniqueness of Christ.

But when Paul and Silas brought the gospel to Europe almost the first people they met violently resented it as being against their national ethos. (Acts 16.20) They complained that the gospel was an Eastern, Asiatic religion incompatible with their Western culture! Fortunately for us, Paul and his friends did not pack their bags and go home. They were careful to be respectful, but they were not deterred! (see Acts 17.22-28).

Readings

Acts 16:6-15

⁶They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

¹¹We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

Acts 16.19–21

¹⁹When the (slave-girl's) owners saw that (through her deliverance from a spirit of divination) their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. . . ²⁰They said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.'

See also Acts 17.22–28

Notes

Acts 16.6. Phrygia was a region to the west of Galatia (in modern Turkey). Sharing the gospel there could have been a tremendous opportunity from a natural perspective, but it was not where God was leading Paul and his team. It was a strange paradox: being commanded to speak the word, yet forbidden by the Holy Spirit to do so 'in Asia'.

v.7. Bithynia was an area in the north of Asia Minor, on the southern shore of the Black Sea.

vv.8-9. Although 'closed doors' are a type of negative guidance, they are nevertheless true guidance. The lesson from Paul's experience here is that negative guidance merely keeps us from where we are **not** called in order that in God's time we might come to where God is calling us.

vv.11-12. Philippi was a leading city, but not the capital of the province of Macedonia, which was Thessalonica.

v.13. The 'place of prayer' appears to have been not a building, but a consecrated space or enclosure in the open air outside the city gates, near a stream where a supply of water for washing of hands before prayer was readily available.

v.14 Lydia, a woman of commerce, was the first known convert on the continent of Europe. She had already been touched by the Jewish faith, being described here as a 'worshipper of God', or 'God-fearer', similar in this way to two other early converts to Christianity, the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) and the centurion Cornelius (Acts 9). She was a businesswoman, temporarily residing at Philippi for the purpose of selling her expensive (purple) cloth.

v.15. Notice that she **and her household** were baptized. This probably means not only family members but equally slaves and employees.

v.19. Hard on the heels of the missionaries' success with Lydia, comes opposition from those whose livelihood was threatened by the freedom brought by the gospel. Too often this remains the case today.

Questions

1. Your 'comfort zone' is a place where you feel safe and at ease - where your activities and behaviors fit a routine and pattern that minimizes stress and risk. It provides a state of mental security with regular happiness, low anxiety, and reduced stress. Paul and the other missionaries were pushed out of their comfort zone when they were called to go into Europe.

In what ways has the Church in Ireland been pushed out of its comfort zone over the past 15 years?

2. Considering your answer to the previous question, what are the moments of opportunity or challenge for the Church?
3. Can you describe some of what Paul may have felt / thought as some doors closed and the challenge of going into a different culture presented itself?
4. What can we learn from the experience of Paul, as well as mistakes in our missionary history, so that we can engage with the 'other' - people beyond our own social, cultural and religious comfort zones?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we ask for a growing intimacy with you – such that it deepens our sense of responsibility for others.

Give us an increasing desire to bring the whole world
with all its suffering and pain
around the divine fire in our heart
and to share that revitalising heat with all who want to come.

May our lives and words draw others
to the warmth of your compassion. Amen.

4. TAKING DOWN THE WALLS

Introduction

TWENTY-FIVE years ago the Berlin Wall came down. The collapse of the wall was sudden. East Germany and indeed the Soviet Union collapsed. The Cold War which had divided East and West Germany had shadowed life in Europe since 1945. For many years people of Eastern Europe had been struggling for freedom. The churches of East Germany and Poland played a great part in this change. Still today the work of reconciliation in Europe needs to continue, especially with Russia.

Conflict is a normal healthy part of human behaviour. But conflict can be destructive and can turn to violence. There are many walls that need to come down between races, classes, religions, and genders as well as between rich and poor. Violent conflict can arise out of these divisions.

‘Determination is the only way to end conflict or even start negotiations,’ says Archbishop Welby. The Christian needs to carry peace and grace as a treasure for the world. We need to be open to others, even those we disagree with strongly.

First we need to understand the issues (*research*) be prepared to meet others (*risk*) and build up relationships (*relate*). Many of the walls have economic roots, and these need to be addressed. To bring down walls risks need to be taken. Also we need to recognise that reconciliation will not come quickly. There is a need for justice, restitution and forgiveness; conflict may continue, but without violence. Reconciliation, is a foretaste of kingdom.

The passage for today’s study depicts a single new humanity under Christ. The Jews and Gentiles of the time were deeply divided; the Jews considered all non-Jews to be alienated from the life of God, alienated from the People of Israel. This double alienation is replaced by reconciliation. The wall of division has been broken down by Christ.

Reading

Ephesians 2: 11-22

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Notes

This letter, probably written in Paul's name by a younger colleague, is addressed to Gentile Christians in Ephesus who are contemplating separation from Jewish Christians. The writer reminds them that Christ united them with the people of Israel.

Ephesians 2.11. The human race was formerly divided into two: circumcised and uncircumcised.

v.12. Christ, that is the Messiah, belongs to Israel, so as non-Jews (Gentiles) they originally had no access to him as they were excluded from the covenant given to Abraham.

v.13. 'But Now' – God has stepped in for the Gentiles 'in Christ Jesus' they have been 'brought near' to the people of Israel.

v.14. 'Broken down the dividing wall'. Paul may have in mind the wall that stood in the temple of Jerusalem between court of the Gentiles and the inner courts, where only Jews could enter.

v.15a. 'Christ abolished the Law'. The Jewish Law was called a wall by some Jews, because they pictured it as protecting them from Gentile wickedness. The law included circumcision, the food laws, the festivals and worship.

v.15b. 'Christ has created a new humanity'. Jews and Gentiles are reconciled in one body, something formerly deemed impossible.

v.16-17. God has done this through the Cross. Hostility is ended.

v.18. Joined to Christ, we have victory over death, and we are joined to each other by the spirit.

v.19. You are now made citizens of the people of God – the church, members of God's family, with instant access to him.

v.20-22. As God's family, we live in the same 'house' as him. Paul develops the idea of the temple.

v.20a. The New Testament prophets and apostles are meant here.

v.20b. Jesus is the Cornerstone - determining the whole structure.

v. 21-22. The building is under construction; it is still growing.

v. 22. God lives in his temple, by his spirit. God lives in you. The temple is an allusion to the Jerusalem temple. In Ephesus there was also a massive temple of Artemis. The real God dwells in the real temple, and that is you!

Questions

1. Are churches and communities in your Town/City/Diocese culturally divided?
2. When do Christian Churches put up walls rather than take them down?
3. Peace is mentioned 4 times in the passage. Jesus is peace (v.14), makes peace (v.15), and preaches peace (v.17). In what ways should we imitate him? Are there ever times when it is wrong to make peace?
4. God reaches out to those far away to bring them near. Who are the far away we should seek? So what should we do in practice?

Prayer

Father, you have committed to men and women
The good news of your saving love
And set us as ambassadors for Christ
In your world:
Help us together to bear witness
To the message of reconciliation,
That in the new life of your Church
Men and women may become new creatures
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

5. DO AS YOU WOULD BE DONE BY

Introduction

WE HAVE seen how the logic of Christian approaches to reconciliation is rooted in Christ's own ministry of reconciliation (especially 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21). Our two readings this week describe the attitudes that underpin this ministry of reconciliation: a Christian identity made possible by the experience of God's love (1 John 4) and Jesus' own expression of the so-called Golden Rule (Matt. 7.12).

The French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre once said that 'Hell is other people'. Even if we have some sympathy with his sentiment, we know too that it is a profoundly unchristian attitude! How we view other people and in turn how we treat them, remain urgent questions, especially as we struggle to cope with economic migrants, refugees from the Syrian conflict and the on-going issues of homelessness and sectarianism still affecting our communities. More personally, we all have people in our day-to-day lives who we find really difficult, if not 'hellish'!

The 'Golden Rule' is found in a part of the Sermon on the Mount that deals specifically with relationships, relationships to other categories of people as well as to God our Father. It can be understood as a general principle to guide us in our relationships with other people. In John Stott's view, 'It transforms our actions. If we put ourselves sensitively into the place of the other person, and wish for them what we would wish for ourselves, we would be never be mean, always generous; never harsh, always understanding; never cruel, always kind.'

Our reading from 1 John begins to provide us with the rationale for the Golden Rule; a rationale that draws us into the very mystery of the Gospel: the transformative character of God's self-giving love. In your study, set these two passages alongside each other and allow them to speak to one other.

Readings

Matthew 7

¹ “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye. ⁶ “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

¹² “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

1 John 4: 17-21

¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Notes

Matthew 7: 12

The so-called Golden Rule, or a variation of it, is found in many religious and cultural contexts. For instance it appears in Tobit 4: 15 and in the writings of Rabbi Hillel in the Talmud: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary' (Shabbath 312). However Jesus expresses the principle in much more positive terms than does Hillel.

1 John 4: 17-21

v.17. The New Testament writers all presuppose what we know as 'the end times' or 'the last things'. One element of the last times is 'the day of judgment'. John encourages his readers to face this time of judgment confident in God's love, which is already operative in and through them.

v.18. There can be no fear for those who know and inhabit God's love.

v.19. God's love is always primary. We are able to love only because God has loved us first. One commentator puts it like this: 'Fear lives in us by nature, and needs to be driven out. *Agape*, Godlike love . . . does not reside in our fallen nature; 'our very capacity to love, whether the object of our love be God or neighbour' is due entirely to his prior love for us and in us.

v.20. The truth of our claim to love God is shown in our capacity to love our neighbour. If we do not love our brothers and sisters our Christian faith is exposed as a lie – or at least as inadequate.

v.21. Compare Jesus' double commandment to love God and neighbour: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your mind . . . and you shall love you neighbour as yourself.' (Matthew 22: 37-40).

Questions

1. How do our two readings help to deepen the way we think about reconciliation?
2. What sort of problems or obstacles might there be for Christians today implementing Jesus' Golden Rule?
3. Might the Golden Rule provide a point of meeting between Christians, followers of other religions and those who judge behaviour by secular standards?
4. What are we going to do differently as a result of these Bible Studies on Reconciliation?

Prayer

Almighty God,
who called your Church to bear witness
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:
Help us to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may be drawn to you;
through him who was lifted up on the cross,
and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever. Amen.

***Let us pray together that God will lead us
to perfect reconciliation with him,
with one another and with all people.***

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from
race, class from class

Father forgive

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess
what is not their own

Father forgive

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and
lays waste the earth

Father forgive

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others

Father forgive

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned,
the homeless, the refugee

Father forgive

The lust which dishonours the bodies of men,
women and children

Father forgive

The pride that leads us to trust in ourselves and not
in God

Father forgive

***Be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
forgiving one another,
as God in Christ forgave you.***

Cross of Nails Litany, Coventry Cathedral.

*Blessed Lord
who caused all holy scriptures to be written
for our learning:
Help us to hear them,
to read mark learn and inwardly digest them
that through patience and the comfort
of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour
Jesus Christ.*

Book of Common Prayer