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Being Reconciled – Feast of the Trinity (2 Corinthians 5. 16-21)

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This year the Feast of Trinity falls in the middle of National Reconciliation Week – the week when our nation focuses on our longing and need for reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. This seems to me a significant juxtaposition – and a mutually illuminating one. The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that relationship, being towards the other, is not just another thing Christians should care about, but is internal to the life of God. At the same time, the difficulty of *practising* reconciliation in the actual circumstances of human life show how challenging God’s reconciling way of being is for us. It raises once more the question of how we are to participate in what St Paul calls ‘the ministry of reconciliation’, a ministry entrusted to us by the God who is reconciling love.

That was what I wrote as the first paragraph of this reflection. And then I suddenly felt very tired. Because, indeed, *how* are we to participate in the ‘ministry of reconciliation’ entrusted to us? We’ve had a lot of National Reconciliation weeks now ... and I’m not sure really how much further we are ahead. The experience of indigenous disadvantage seems stubbornly difficult to transform. And reconciliation with our indigenous brothers and sisters is not all that’s needed in our nation. Reports and testimony emerging from the Ballarat hearings of the Royal Commission on Institutional Child Abuse make once again starkly visible the appalling alienation that pervaded so many religious and state run institutions around our country, and the catastrophic wounding inflicted on children, families and communities because of it. What could reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, victims and the churches, or within the lives of victims and their families, possibly look like in this context? And then there are the hidden and deep wounds that many of us carry –

bits of our past or ourselves that seem so profoundly to resist being reconciled – that keep tripping us up, even when we think we’ve ‘dealt’ with them once and for all.

The *promise* of reconciliation is at the heart of Christian life. We are called to be at one with God and so one with ourselves and with each other. In John’s gospel, Jesus’ final prayer for his disciples is that ‘they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one’ (John 17. 22-23). And yet – over 2000 years later – we seem as far from at one-ness, from reconciliation, as we ever were. What then does it mean still to be called to the ministry of reconciliation?

Well, partly, it seems to mean just get on with it, keep going, don’t give up. Parker Palmer tells a story of time he spent with the Catholic worker movement in New York in the 1960s. Members of this community lived among the poor of the city, advocating for them with social services, picking up the pieces as they fell through the cracks in the system time and again. They ran a kitchen which provided for many of these people the only meal they had each day. As Parker saw the endlessness of the need and the endlessness of the task he asked one of the long-term workers how she could continue. Wasn’t it all pointless? Wasn’t it impossible to make a real difference? She replied, ‘Parker, just because something is impossible, it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it’.¹ To seek to be ministers of reconciliation in an alienated world is always going to be an endless task. As Parker says elsewhere, the question we need to ask ourselves first is not whether we are being successful, but whether we are being faithful – as faithful as we can be in the circumstances of our lives, to the task that is set before us.

The problem is that this can sound like stoicism – a kind of resigned heroism, and a recipe for burn out. And here’s where, I think, the gospel makes all the difference. St Paul takes it for granted that we are ministers of a reconciliation that has already happened – we are not generating it ourselves – we are ambassadors of

¹ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1990), p.76.

a new reality of 'at-oneness' that has already come into being. 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away ... All this is from God', he says, 'who reconciled us to himself through Christ'. The reconciliation we seek to share is a reconciliation to be entered – not one that we make happen. It is given – we are opening ourselves to receive it ...

But what does this really mean? What does it mean for children in Aboriginal communities – growing up culturally dispossessed and faced too often with systemic racism, communal dysfunction, violence, addiction and hopelessness? What does it mean for the middle-aged men and women testifying in Ballarat, robbed of their childhoods and often of healthy sexual identity, struggling with mental health issues, the whole course of their lives seemingly deformed by the abuse they suffered? What use is the proclamation of God's reconciliation of all things in Christ to them? What does it even mean?

Well – it can't mean anything glib – like everyone gets to live happily ever after; or everything happens for a reason. It can't gloss over the reality of meaningless suffering. What it does mean, I think, is this. We can trust that our cries of protest against injustice and being disregarded, our yearning for healing, for being restored to the fullness of ourselves – these deepest of our yearnings and need, are *with* the grain of God – with the nature of ultimate reality. They are congruent. And we are promised – almost unbelievably – that this reality is *active*. God is always and already at work, reconciling all things – and we are invited to participate in this work, to join in.

How do we do that? It seems to me that there are two aspects to our participation – active and passive. On the 'active' side, there are necessary conditions for the reconciliation of deep wounds and ruptured relationships. Pre-eminently, the truth needs to be told and it needs to be heard. What happened and what it cost needs to be acknowledged – and that's so for communities and in individual lives. Part of the ministry of reconciliation is creating opportunities for truth-telling – and

here things like the Bringing Them Home report on the stolen generation, the Royal Commission on Child Abuse are signs of hope, steps towards the possibility of being reconciled.

Having named these wounds, *our* wounds – we then need to let them speak, to hear them, grieve them, rage about them, honour them. As this begins to happen, we are no longer in ‘control’ of the process. It must play itself out. This is a kind of ‘undergoing’, a passion – where healing might begin to happen way below the level of conscious awareness. It usually takes much longer than we, or anyone else, would like. But if and as we yield ourselves to it, we become open to reconciliation, a space through which the reconciling energy of God’s life might flow. Our primary task here is not to block it – to get out of our own and others’ way as best we can.

So sometimes we need simply to guard the space – to give people time, allow them speak and grieve. In our own lives, we get out of the way of the movement of reconciliation as we let go certain stories about ourselves, our attachment to certain self-images, as we dare to believe we are loveable and belong on this earth.

In all this, faith is not a magic wand – it simply enables us to trust, however fitfully and painfully, that if we yield ourselves to it, then deep reconciliation is possible, because at the level of creation, it is already given – and from all eternity. This is the reconciliation enfleshed in time by Jesus. How? He told the truth, he named our collective alienation and refused to let us turn a blind eye to our victims – those cast out to make a social or religious system work, over whose bodies and disregarded lives some kind of ‘normal’ goes on. He stood for the possibility that none should be left out or lost, and suffered the agony of fury and fear this unleashed. He entrusted himself to the Father for the healing of his wounds. In some mysterious and deep way, he created a path on which we might travel the same journey of reconciliation.

How then do we participate in this ministry, which is the Trinitarian life of God? We participate by being reconciled; and then standing for the possibility of reconciliation in our world, broken heart by broken heart ... for in Christ Jesus we are already one.