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Be Reconciled (2 Corinthians 5: 17-21)

Lent 1

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‘All glory and honour be yours always and everywhere, mighty Creator, ever-living God. We give you thanks and praise for your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ ... By his victory over death, the reign of sin is ended, a new day has dawned, a broken world is restored and we are made whole once more’.¹ These words are from one of the traditional Eucharistic prayers at Easter. Here’s another: ‘Holy and gracious God, all creation rightly gives you praise. All life, all holiness, comes from you through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, whom you sent to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all’.²

I wonder what happens for you, as you hear these words? For some of us, perhaps, they’re so familiar, so well-worn, they just start to roll over us – it can be hard to maintain attention and focus, really to take them in; for others of us, perhaps, they seem frustratingly incomprehensible or wildly overblown or just too blandly religious. It’s not so much overuse, as lack of grip that’s the problem. What on earth do they actually mean?

And yet, right here, in these very words, the central axis of Christian life is expressed. We were broken and are now whole; we were alienated and are now reconciled. This is the whole point and accomplishment of Jesus. It’s what we’re preparing to remember and re-enact at Easter. ‘If anyone is in Christ’, says St Paul, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation’ (2 Cor. 5: 17-18). This Lent, I’d like us to spend some

¹ Easter Preface, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Australian Anglican Church (Broughton Books, 1999).

² Thanksgiving 3, *A Prayer Book for Australia*.

time contemplating this astonishing proclamation, its many faceted meanings and its effect for our lives.

The difficulty to be faced at the outset, however, is the suspicion that this supposed gift of reconciliation in Christ is an answer in search of a question, a 'solution' in search of a 'problem'. I once saw a pamphlet issued by a conservative Anglican church that raised this issue for me rather acutely. The pamphlet offered a four-step diagram to illustrate what Jesus has done for us. First came a picture of the world, a little round earth; next came a picture of a ticking time bomb representing the imminent and violent judgement of God; then came Jesus nailed to a cross; and finally a group of relieved and happy humans. It's got a kind of logic – but if you don't buy the premise, if you don't buy there's that kind of 'problem' to begin with, then why would you think Jesus is the answer? And this suggests that if we're going to engage with the promise and possibility of 'being reconciled', we need first to be able to take seriously the fact and nature of our alienation.

In the Christian tradition, there are many ways of thinking of this. But in the broadest possible sense, here are what I take to be the basic elements. Christianity proclaims a 'normative' vision of humanity. That is, it proclaims we can be more or less fully human, more or less who we're created to be. Being human, on this understanding, isn't just a biological matter – being a member of the species *homo sapiens*. We all know we can be biologically human and yet live (so to say) inhumanly. This normative vision has its roots in the Hebrew tradition; in the Jewish people's sense that God has taught them (through the Law and the prophets) that there's a particular way of living and being in community that's consistent with the Creator's will and so expresses true human being. This vision of what it means to be properly human is encapsulated by the prophet Micah: 'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (6:8).

This distinctive human destiny is confirmed and revealed even more radically, so Christians believe, by Jesus. Rowan Williams says that in the Christian vision ‘to be fully human is to be recreated in the image of Christ’s humanity’,³ and this means becoming able to see as he sees, love as he loves. It means growing in our capacity to recognise and enable wholeness in ourselves, in others and the world around us. This is what being truly human looks like. It’s what we’re made for, which means it should be possible, realisable by all of us. And yet ... if we look at ourselves, if we look at our world, what do we see?

One of the persistent themes in the letters of Paul concerns the gap between what we’re called to be and what we do. But what’s radical in his sense of this is not just that we’re failing to live up to a difficult ideal, as if God has given an impossible task at which we’re bound to fail. It’s that we find ourselves unable to be who we most truly are. Paul insists that we must recognise ‘in the world signs of a system or a complex of processes that has rebelled against its true nature’.⁴ And, in one of the most powerful passages in Scripture, he passionately laments his powerlessness to free even himself from such ‘unnatural’ ways of being – even though he sincerely desires to *be* differently: ‘I do not understand my own actions’, he cries. ‘For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ (Rom. 7: 14-24). This is ‘sin’, but it’s not just moral fault. There’s something ‘ontological’ about it. Sebastian Moore describes us as suffering from a built in ‘cut-offness from God that was somehow woven into the human condition’.⁵

Now I know this is tricky territory – and we don’t very often at Benedictus have a sermon on sin! Some of you grew up in contexts where you were bludgeoned as children with the news that you were miserable, rotten sinners, personally

³ Rowan Williams, ‘Address to the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith’ (Rome: October 2012), s.3.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.49.

⁵ Sebastian Moore, *Let This Mind Be in You: The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p.87.

responsible for the death of Jesus – made guilty, self-loathing and frightened. Needless to say, this is not what I'm hoping to communicate! But just because there are corrupt and corrupting accounts of sin, doesn't mean there's not something important to be named here. All spiritual traditions understand that there's something in the human condition – probably it's in the very structures of consciousness that enable us to become separate selves – that tends in the direction of this 'cut-offness' from the whole, cut-offness from the real, in self-isolation, self-dependence, self-righteousness. The effects show up differently in different personalities – this is where a tool like the Enneagram can be so profoundly helpful. Our alienation can take the form of the compulsion to be right or to succeed, a pervasive competitiveness or miserliness, a lust to control or consume, a habitual pattern self-justification, defensiveness, self-deception or pride. It leads us to protect and project ourselves over against others, and keep ourselves closed to the strangely terrifying inrush of God's love. And always, left unchecked and untransformed, these tendencies bring destruction to ourselves and others – making us miserable, selfish and self-hurting.

'All alike have sinned and fall short of the glory of God', Paul says. We can describe why this is so in the language of rebellion and wilful opposition, or by other metaphors – we're asleep or ignorant, lost, confused, misled, 'captive to the elemental spirits of the universe', born into a world 'tissued and structured by sin' as our gathering prayer had it. Perhaps all these dynamics are involved. But if we're to be and become truly human, human as Jesus is human, then something in us needs to be healed, some connection restored, our illusions unmasked and a proper receptivity and humility enabled. This is what Jesus is said to have accomplished: 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself', says Paul, 'not counting their trespasses [that is, their failures and refusals] against them'. It's at this level of our being that we are to be re-created and it's undergoing this re-creation, this being reconciled, that turns us into ministers of reconciliation, in our turn.

How this works, how this gift of restoration is effected, we'll be exploring more fully in coming weeks. But this week, our first week in Lent, I invite you to dwell with the promise and possibility of 'being reconciled'. What might this mean for you? What deep-seated habits of being do you sense might be in the way of total and trusting connection to the source of your life and so the truth of yourself? Don't be guilty about it. Don't try hard to make it go away. Just begin, very gently, to own it, name it. And do not be afraid. God is on our side to reconcile and heal: for through Christ 'the reign of sin is ended, a new day has dawned, a broken world is restored and we are made whole once more'.