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Dying *pro nobis* (Romans 5: 1-11)

Lent 3

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Again and again, the letters of Paul characterise what Christ has done for us as an enabling of reconciliation. Through Christ, he writes, God ‘reconciled us’ and ‘all things to himself’ (2 Cor. 5:18; Col 1.20). Enmity between God and humanity, as well as within and between different human groups, is overcome because Christ ‘is our peace’. (Eph. 2: 13). In our Lenten reflections this year, we’re seeking to explore and deepen our response to this proclamation, this event of reconciliation.

In the past two weeks, we’ve focused on the whole question of our ‘need’ to be reconciled. What does it mean to conceive of human beings without Christ as in some sense estranged, alienated and requiring redemption? Who says that’s how we are? And I’ve suggested this way of imagining the human condition as one, in some sense, of lack becomes available to the New Testament writers in the light of their encounters with Jesus. They see him acting to restore belonging and self-respect where people are cast out of community or alienated from themselves; and where people are proudly self-righteousness, they see him unmasking their delusions and covert violence. In him, they recognise what we all could be, fully alive and generative of life, truthful, free and boundlessly loving; and at the same time, they recognise how short we often fall of that fullness of being, how we diminish and are diminished by others, how we can sabotage ourselves. This falling short, this missing the mark, is what they call ‘sin’. This is what puts us in need of being reconciled – that is, made whole, brought home to ourselves, to one another and to God, capable of becoming peacemakers, ministers of reconciliation in our turn.

If this is our basic situation, tonight’s reading brings us to the question of the ‘work’ of reconciliation, the process by which it’s accomplished. And what we hear is

that we are reconciled because Christ died for us. 'For while we were still weak', Paul writes, 'at the right time Christ died for the ungodly'. And again, 'while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son' (Rom. 5: 6, 10). How are we to understand this?

One way of spelling out the meaning and effect of Jesus' death involves the idea that, somehow, God needed to punish humankind for our habitual 'missing of the mark', our 'sin'. What Paul calls the 'enmity' between God and humanity could only be overcome by a payment, a blood sacrifice, and God (out of his great love for us) volunteered his only Son for the role, and Jesus (out of his great love for us) accepted the mission. On this account, Jesus took our punishment, and now we are 'reconciled' to God. 'God proves his love for us', Paul writes, 'in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. ... [So] now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God' (5: 9).

Well, despite this being one of the long-standing interpretations of the meaning of Jesus' death and the mechanism by which our reconciliation is effected, there are significant theological difficulties with it. For one thing, there is (to say the least) a troubling inconsistency in attributing to God such a profoundly a punitive streak. After all, Jesus' ministry enacts again and again God's welcome and mercy, God's prodigal forgiveness and generosity. The idea that this God now requires our death by proxy so as to be persuaded to be gracious towards us doesn't add up. For another thing, this interpretation doesn't really engage the question of how Jesus' death reconciles *us*. It seems kind of transactional, happening 'above our heads'. God would have punished us, but thanks to Jesus, now we're promised that he won't. That's good news, I guess, but I don't feel particularly reconciled, changed or transformed by it – I've just dodged a bullet.

And here's a further telling observation. Although our English translation of Paul's words is that Jesus' death saves us 'from the wrath *of God*', the original Greek speaks simply of 'the wrath' in general. As in: 'we will be saved through him from the

wrath'. This suggests to me that it's not *God's* 'wrath' we need to be rescued from at all, but the destructive forces already at work in the world – those within and around us that wreak havoc. This is what the death of Jesus is supposed to help. But how? How does his death effect *our* reconciliation – how does it help us forgive, be whole, integrate our wounds? How does it change what's possible for each of us and our relationships with one another?

Well, we could probably spend the rest of our lives on this. And part of what we need to recognise is that there's a level at which it's beyond explanation – there is no tidy theory that gets it under our control, and whenever we try to impose one we distort or limit things. It seems to me, we'll only begin to apprehend this mystery as we approach it in a contemplative spirit – humbly, receptively, letting it yield itself to us and change what's possible for us. So what follows are just a few thoughts offered in the service of this work of contemplative apprehension.

This week we've been acutely aware of the suffering of the people of Christchurch – those members of the Muslim community murdered or wounded while at prayer, the terrible grief of their families and friends, the horror as well as the overflowing of compassion and solidarity from the wider community in New Zealand and around the world. We're aware of other pain too. There are the traumas and wounds of our personal histories; the ever-deepening crisis of the natural world and the prospect of widespread social collapse; the catastrophic cyclone in East Africa; the continuing wound of Australia's First Nations peoples and a sense of the mounting futility of the capitalist juggernaut and the politics that serves it. In myriad ways, we suffer profoundly the pain of powerlessness, anxiety, enmeshment in sin.

This is the world into which Jesus has come as the embodiment of God who is only ever creative of life, towards us as healing love. Not surprisingly, he doesn't last long. He's pushed out of this world – too dangerous, too truthful; he's made to suffer what all the world's victims suffer – violence, disregard, misunderstanding, death. But the difference is that his suffering isn't just random, unlucky. He has chosen to

be there for our sake, in solidarity with the persecuted, ‘one with the wounded ones’, yet still transparent to the life of God, still breathing out only love and life. He suffers the world’s rejection without retaliation or self-protection, and without giving up on us – any of us. He’s deliberately given over for the healing of victims and perpetrators alike. And this is where the alchemy happens. It’s this act of the most profound self-giving love that opens a radically new space of possibility. It breaks open the chains of violent reciprocity and creates a new field of energy in the world. Paul calls it ‘a new creation’, and this is a field of energy into which we can now tap, be resourced by.

How do we get access? When we let ourselves be truly present to the pain of the world, when we seek neither to deny nor act out of it, but consent simply to bear it, to undergo it as Jesus did, two things happen. One is that the pain no longer rends and divides us, but mysteriously heals and connects us (to ourselves and to others). Martin Laird speaks of the ‘liturgy of our wounds’, where we discover that ‘our wound and the wound of God are one wound’. Our wounds are different – for some loneliness, shame, anger, betrayal, failure, self-hatred ... And sometimes it feels impossible to be with them, let alone embrace them. But Laird writes: ‘God in Christ has taken into Himself the brokenness of the human condition. Hence, human woundedness, brokenness, death itself are transformed from dead ends to doorways into Life’.¹ You have to try it, to know it’s true. As you do, you realise a growing freedom to forgive, and gently to behold and tend each other’s vulnerability

And this is how we come to share Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. Sometimes this will come out in action. I think of how Jacinda Ardern’s willingness to bear and be undefendedly with the pain of her community has enabled her to be an authentically reconciling presence in our world this week. Sometimes it will come out

¹ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.119.

in prayer and what can be the deeply painful work of real intercession, as in the midst of 'wrath' we keep open the space for God in ourselves and in the world.

Paul is very clear that the death of Jesus for us has made possible something that was not possible before, a profound at-oneness between God and humanity. It means we can dwell in and live now from the peace of God. But he is also very clear that in this broken world, the fullness of this reconciliation is yet to be realised. Joining with Christ will necessarily be for us a way of suffering. Even so, we need not be dismayed – because, he says, 'suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (5: 3-5). We are among those called to suffer the world's pain that we might learn to hope in this way, that we might join in holding open the space of possibility where grace might enter in. In our difficult times, I cannot imagine a work more urgently needed than this.