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Nothing Lost: The Mark of Reconciliation (John 6. 35-40)

Sarah Bachelard

At the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, in Russia, there's a famous and very beautiful painting by Rembrandt called 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'. The son is portrayed, kneeling at his father's feet, his eyes closed and his head leaning against his father's stomach – exhausted, humbled and relieved. The father is leaning over his son's bent head, his face shining and his hands resting tenderly on his son's back. It's a powerful and moving image of Jesus' words: 'anyone who comes to me I will never drive away'. It's a portrait of the nature of God the Father: 'this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day'.

This desire that nothing and no-one should be lost is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and his revelation of God. As well as the parable of the prodigal son, think of the stories of the search for the lost sheep and the lost coin; the restoration of the outcast and diseased to themselves and to community. Think of his return to the disciples after his resurrection in forgiveness and his calling them into renewed relationship. This is a ministry of reconciliation. As St Paul writes, in Christ we are reconciled to God because our failings and betrayals are not held against us. And this changes how we see God, one another and ourselves.

God first. The life and ministry of Jesus reveals that God is a whole-making, welcoming, encompassing God – not the dualistic, condemning and excluding God of religious nightmare. The power of God is towards us as healing and integration. The righteousness of God operates not to condemn us but, as Martin Luther saw, to make us righteous, to invite us into wholeness and the fullness of ourselves. This is what the doctrine of justification by grace means – we are made right, we are reconciled by sheer

gift. And this is what makes possible the New Testament's radical claim that 'God is love', that God is light in whom there is no darkness at all.

This vision of God changes, in turn, how we see other people. If this is what God is like – not just towards me but towards everyone – then my own tendencies to condemn and exclude, to separate people into those who belong and those who don't belong, are called radically into question. From early on, the Christian community recognized the profound implications of this. The disciples had seen how Jesus related to those they would have deemed beyond the pale, and excluded from the community of the elect. They saw him welcome, heal, and call them to vocations of their own. More and more, they came to understand that divisions which till now had structured their identity, and their social and religious belonging, were in fact nothing to do with God. God is not tribal, favouring an 'in' group of the self-selected chosen, but is rather 'the Father of us all'.

The Letter to the Ephesians, writing of the crumbling of the divide between Jew and Gentile, puts it this way: 'So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God' (Eph. 2.17-19). Christ has 'broken down the dividing wall that is, the hostility between us' (Eph.2.14). And in the Letter to the Galatians, St Paul works out the further implications of this radical vision of God; not only is there 'no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3.28).

And there is a yet more extraordinary implication of this vision of God as reconciling love. Not only may we recognize those who are different from ourselves – different race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity – as our brothers and sisters, children of the one Father; this vision of God also affects possibilities for relationship with those who have done evil, who have hurt and betrayed us.

Australian philosopher, Raimond Gaita, has said that it matters profoundly that prisoners be allowed to receive visitors. This is because unless the guards learn to see their prisoners through the eyes of those who love them, they are unlikely to take seriously their full humanity, to see them as their fellow human beings. In the same kind of way, as we begin to see others as Jesus sees, we glimpse the possibility of fellowship and reconciliation even with those from whom we are divided by injury and suffering.

This doesn't mean we're called to offer bland and cheap forgiveness for every wrong. Gaita says that if someone who has done evil were to be the beneficiary of a saint's love, it would be 'a severe love'. This is because 'it would not count as love unless it were lucid about the evil of his crimes'. Nevertheless, 'love it would be'.¹ If we are to see one another, even those who have wronged us, as Christ does then it means holding open the space of repentance, the possibility of mercy and restoration. It means refusing the temptation to write others off and settle for the reciprocal diminishment of perpetual alienation.

In a similar vein, Rowan Williams speaks of how our transformation in the way of Christ, leads us to become more free 'to "love human beings in a human way", to love them not for what they may promise me, to love them not as if they were there to provide me with lasting safety and comfort, but as fragile fellow-creatures held in the love of God'. This, he says, is about discovering 'how to see other persons and things for what they are in relation to God, not to me'.² It's about being willing, as we can, to participate in Christ's ministry of reconciliation.

And finally, the discovery that God is whole-making, reconciling love changes how we see ourselves. It means that there's nothing in us – in our history, in our way of being, there's no fear, or sin, or vulnerability, that cannot be brought to God, that

¹ Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.xxx.

² Rowan Williams, 'Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome', 10 October 2012, s.10 (<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome#sthash.VVCAYpWb.dpuf>)

cannot become a means of our deepening integration and transformation. In fact, it's at just these places of our vulnerability, shame and failure – that God will meet and work in us for our healing. Martin Laird, a teacher of contemplative prayer, beautifully characterises this as the liturgy of our wounds.³ It's why Julian of Norwich says that, when we bring them to God, with the vision of the kingdom of heaven, our sin will become our glory. And here we might remember Peter whose three-fold betrayal, acknowledged and repented in the presence of Jesus, becomes the opening to his renewed vocation. There's nothing that cannot be integrated, healed, or turned from death to life, by this reconciling love of God.

That doesn't mean it's painless. When our alienation and wounding goes deep, reconciliation is a crucifying work. Acknowledging our dividedness, our buried vulnerabilities, and beginning to deconstruct our strategies for self-protection – the walls that divide us from ourselves and each other – is a difficult and painful process. We will confront, as Jesus did, abysses of fear and dread. But the promise of our faith is that Jesus has gone ahead of us, and calls us forward into the welcoming arms of God – who wills that none of us and no part of us should be lost.

As we commit ourselves at Benedictus to the mark of reconciliation, may we indeed be a community which enables this journey to wholeness, a community which proclaims, celebrates and trusts this vision of God.

³ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.117ff.