

That They May Be One: Practising Reconciliation (John 17. 20-26)

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It's quite a week in which to be exploring the fourth mark of Benedictus, reconciliation. According to the gospel of John, Jesus' final prayer on his disciples' behalf is that they may be brought into union with each other and with God. 'I ask ... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us'. This plea for unity, it's said, is 'so that the world may believe that you have sent me'. It's a bit like that earlier passage in John's gospel, where Jesus says: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13.34-35). According to John, the unity, the harmony and mutual love of the community of Christ makes visible the nature of God; and the promise is that discipleship of Christ makes this unity a real possibility for human beings.

But then, we look around us. At the enraged and implacable faces of armed mobs gathering outside polling places in the United States, and hate-filled trolling in the Twitter-sphere; at bombed out buildings in Azerbaijan and Armenia, and random terror attacks in France; we witness what seems like the active enjoyment of the culture warriors in *hurting* their ideological opponents and deliberately polarizing communities. Rather than experiencing disunity or disharmony as painful, in need of healing or redemption, there are whole swathes of the human population that seem to relish antagonism and division, to be spoiling for a fight, *wanting* something or someone to be against.

In the past, I have assumed 'reconciliation' to be a more or less self-evident good – something that anyone would agree matters, that everyone would want. But I wonder if that's an assumption that needs questioning? Could it be that for many

people 'reconciliation' doesn't occur as particularly desirable? And if that's so, what makes us believe that it matters, and that we are called to practise it?

The word 'reconciliation' is interesting. 'Conciliare', from the Latin, means to be friendly, to bring together or into harmony. The prefix 're' means 'again'. And I think this is telling. Because built into the notion of re-conciliation is a presupposition of the *loss* of harmony, loss of friendliness. Reconciliation means 'to *restore* to union and friendship after estrangement or variance' says one dictionary. So the word itself presupposes a breach, an alienation, a falling out. And the New Testament seems to assume that the state of being unreconciled is a built-in risk, if not a built-in feature of the human condition.

In the gospels, Jesus is portrayed again and again as coming upon those who, for one reason or another, find themselves alienated from themselves, from God or from others in their community. He acts again and again to heal divisions, to restore and reconnect – to make possible mutuality and unity. Think of all those dinners where those deemed not to belong were welcomed along with everyone else. Ultimately, by returning to his disciples in peace after his betrayal and death, he reveals that there is nothing in human being – no breach, no transgression or hostility – that is beyond God's desire or capacity to reconcile. In Christ, wrote St Paul, 'God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them' (2 Corinthians 5.19).

But this raises the question of why reconciliation matters so much to God. Why is it not OK to settle for divisions within and between ourselves, self-righteous factions toughing it out in contexts raging from the playground to the boardroom, from the bedroom to the streets? What is so damn good about being reconciled – especially with those idiots over there who are doing so much damage and who are self-evidently WRONG??

Well, in finance, when a balance sheet is unreconciled, it means there's some kind of mismatch or inconsistency – something doesn't tally or add up. And if you continue operating on the basis of this inconsistency, sooner or later, your business

comes to a standstill; affairs are snarled, and become unworkable. When human beings are unreconciled, it's not so different. It begins with some mismatch in understanding or sympathy or expectation, some wrong or wound that isn't put right, integrated or healed. And if things continue on that unstable basis, sooner or later, they stop working; life stops flowing.

For where division, misunderstanding and injustice persist, then inevitably they increase. Differences tend to be weaponized, the stories we tell about ourselves or each other become entrenched, hurt and trauma are inherited by succeeding generations. So young Muslims murder French and Austrian civilians; ethnic conflicts ignite on the slightest provocation; indigenous Australians are incarcerated at a catastrophic rate and the United States appears to teeter on the brink.

On the other hand, where reconciliation can be achieved, where alienation, hostility, division and misunderstanding are resolved, there comes a profound release of life's energy. Mutual frustration and futility give way to mutual flourishing and the release of creativity. There's a new future to live into. Reconciliation matters to God, I think, because it's about the unsnarling of life and the possibility of abundance for all. It's what Jesus comes to make possible at every level, and it's the heart of the ministry entrusted to us. The question is, what does it mean to practise it?

Rowan Williams has warned there can be sentimental and unreflective appeals to reconciliation – it can be, he says, 'such a seductively comfortable word'.¹ But the truth is that the work of reconciliation is often profoundly uncomfortable, if not downright painful. It requires being honest about what's not OK, being willing to 'hear' the pain in ourselves and in one another without resorting to defensive tactics like minimizing, self-justifying, blaming. Even if we're convinced the other is in the wrong, even if we have been hurt by them, the possibility of reconciliation requires that we be willing to hear from their point of view. My image of this is as a kind of inner shock absorption – a spaciousness and malleability that allows what feels

¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.266.

deeply unwelcome to be received and its energy dissipated, enfolded, potentially transformed.

At the same time, however, it is essential that we hear our own truth as well as being open to the truth of the other. A commitment to reconciliation does not mean laying ourselves open to constant abuse, capitulating to coercion or the premature shutting down of protest or grief. The prophet Jeremiah decried those who sought to keep the peace at all costs by glossing over injustice: ‘They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace”, when there is no peace’ (Jer. 6.14). Whether in difficult personal relationships or social arrangements, protest and unrest, the refusal to patch things over, can be a necessary movement in the practice of reconciliation. Black Lives Matter, school strikes for climate, #Me Too, the protest of those disenfranchised by neo-liberal economics – all are instances of ‘the wound of my people’ being named, of the refusal to acquiesce in injustice any longer.

So there’s a kind of tension here which requires discernment. On the one hand, practising reconciliation requires the willingness to forgive. Rather than continuing to vent our spleen or discharge hurt towards the other, it requires us to let go what we have against someone, to absorb hurt without paying it back so as to transform it and restore connection. On the other hand, reconciliation is not about cheap peace or cheap grace. It is commitment to genuine harmony, mutuality, union. And in practice, this may require the willingness to disrupt false peace. There may be relationships that cannot be wholly reconciled here on earth – people so damaged or destructive that it is dangerous to be near them, wounds we’ve suffered that make it impossible to sustain openness. Sometimes a commitment to the practise of reconciliation can only show itself by our acknowledgement that (at least for now) we cannot forgive, though we wish it were otherwise. Sometimes it will mean entering processes such as mediation, restorative justice and talking circles which create contexts in which the hard work of truth-telling and pain-bearing can be engaged so as to forge a new ground for being in relation.

Yet the mystery proclaimed by our faith is that, underneath everything, despite all the pain and division of this world, the Spirit of God is at work for the reconciliation of all things and the abundance of life. We know the truth of this faith from our practice of silence – the more we yield ourselves to the One in whom we live and move and have our being, the more we find ourselves being reconciled, at home and at peace with ourselves, ever more capable of sharing that active and energizing peace with others.

Just and merciful God, Jesus prays, ‘the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I have made your way of being known to them, and I will keep making it known to them, unfolding it within them, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them’. In our divided world, in our polarized culture, this is where our mark of reconciliation commits us to be, the peace we seek to inhabit and to share.