

We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, so be reconciled to God

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Reverend Rebecca Newland
Lent 4C, 14 March 2010

Joshua 5:2 -12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16 – 21, Luke 15:11-32

On Wednesday night the new parish council met for the first time since the AGM. Most of the people on the council had been on last year so although it was new it felt very familiar. I am delighted that Ian will continue as the chairperson, Shane will continue as the treasurer and Helen will take over the secretaries' job. We also need to have a short meeting after the 10.00 am service to formally vote Ian in as the second churchwarden. I want to commend all our councillors for stepping up to the mark and being willing to serve the rest of us. Running a parish, facilitating its mission and ministry is a complicated, taxing and at times frustrating job. I also intend that we will have fun and enjoy ourselves. I would ask you all to pray regularly for our parish leadership – for Ian, Denise, Helen, Shane, Fred and Tim.

It will not come as a surprise to you and it certainly was no surprise to the parish council members that as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have some jobs to do. A good portion of our meeting on Wednesday night was taken up by deciding who was going to do what and allocating tasks. The work of parish council is twofold – to provide leadership and to support the rest of us in the jobs we need to do. Just think for a moment what those jobs might be...

Now I am going to tell you about this job – the core, central, most important job you have – you are a minister of reconciliation. If you are sitting in this church, if you are a baptised Christian, if you have made it your business to accept the path Christ offers then you are an ambassador for him, a minister of the reconciliation he embodied. This phrase is only mentioned in the Corinthian reading we heard but it is a theme that runs through all the New Testament.

Paul in this letter was, as usual with that community, trying to help them with their divisions and conflicts. In the midst of their wrangling he always pointed them to Jesus Christ. He said that if you or I are in Christ then the old has passed away and everything has become new. In this new person there is a new understanding, a new relationship with God, a new purpose and a new self. Paul affirms that all this is made possible through Christ who reconciled the world to God and has given his followers this ministry of reconciliation.

I looked up the dictionary to find what it had to say about reconciliation – it means the ending of a conflict, the making of two or more things consistent or compatible. It is the re-establishment of friendship or harmony. I also went back to the New Testament Greek – the word there is *καταλλάσσω* – and it means being put back into friendship with God, being made friends again. It seems such a simple thing doesn't it? Becoming friends again.

The opposite of reconciliation is estrangement, alienation and conflict. An image that comes to mind that helps me picture this is of something that was once whole that is now fractured, split apart and broken. All of us know what estrangement feels and looks like. Perhaps we have experienced it in our families, marriages or partnerships. Perhaps we see it all too clearly in our society and nations. Perhaps we have knowledge of it in ourselves – our heart, body and head – feeling fractured, not working in harmony. In our culture today it is said that people are no longer concerned about the wrath of God but are acutely aware of the experience of God's absence. That you can see by the current demand for books on spirituality. In terms of our society it is indifference, facile tolerance and the absence of

involvement that keep people apart. I sometimes wonder whether the age of the Internet and emails is really the age of ever more estrangement and alienation.

Reconciliation in our setting is about the drawing together of the parts that have become estranged, the healing of what was once whole, the making of friends – with ourselves, each other and the God of all. Bringing all that together into peace, harmony and joy. Is this not the most wonderful of ministries? Is this not something to get excited about? Get excited members of parish council – this is great stuff. All your nitty-gritty decision making and consulting is about facilitating this one goal. Get excited the rest of you – this is what our life as Christians is all about—this reconciliation – the making of friends between all the parts that are estranged and divided. It is about wholeness and peace.

But first things first – we can only do this ministry, this service for the good of the whole world, if we are ourselves reconciled to God. We can only be in Christ, be the new creation, be equipped, strengthened and empowered for this task if we are back being friends with God. Paul says – “*we entreat, we beg you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*”

The parable of the prodigal son of course gives us the clearest picture about reconciliation and it's process. What was once whole, the relationship between father and son, is fractured. In a place of poverty, estrangement and desperation the son comes to his senses and begins the journey home. The father rushes to meet him with outstretched arms, embraces him, kills the fatted calf and rejoices. The elder son sulks—but he is assured that everything the father has is his.

Mahatma Ghandi tells a story of how when he was fifteen he stole a piece of gold from his brother. However he felt so bad he made up his mind to confess it to his father. He wrote out his sin on a piece of paper, asking for forgiveness and punishment, while promising never to steal again. At the time his father was in bed, sick. Ghandi gave him the note and sat by the bed waiting for the judgment. The father sat up in bed and began to read the note. As he read tears came into his eyes. Ghandi cried. Instead of getting angry or punishing him, the father hugged his repentant son and that was the end of the matter. The experience of being loved in this way had a profound effect on Ghandi. He said later, “Only the person who has experienced this kind of love can know what it is”.

There are two parts, two pillars if you like to reconciliation. These pillars are essential. One is the pillar of love and mercy with eagerness and joy thrown in. The other is the pillar of humility and repentance – the decision to turn away from the path that leads to more fragmentation and instead to head back to the place of wholeness.

Imagine these two pillars are the pillars of a bridge but the bridge is broken. God is on one side and you are on the other. Like the younger son in the parable you come to yourself, you come to your senses, and realise that you are living in a place where you are disconnected, estranged from your true being, your true home. The memory of God's love calls to you and awakens your soul – and you start to head home. God, in Christ, comes to meet you. He encourages you, he tells you that on the other side is the place of love and wholeness, the source of all peace and completion. He tells you his Father is abundantly forgiving and merciful, waiting to welcome you home. He lays down his life, across the divide, he stretches out his arms to guide you along the path, so that you can pass over and be united with God. The journey itself transforms you. The love encountered through Christ redeems you. You have died to yourself, your old way of being. You have encountered and been saved by Christ, and are renewed. And your joy and peace know no bounds. Your soul has come to rest in God. This is what Christ offers, each and every day for each moment of time and space.

Then God taps you on the shoulder and says, “right – get back out there – show other people the way home – you are my minister of reconciliation, you are my ambassador”. We are always personal representatives of Jesus Christ in every situation, not just in church on Sunday morning, but in every situation.

To finish with here are some hot tips on how to be a minister of reconciliation.

1. If you feel estranged or distant from God then get reconciled. Make friends again. Find some time to reach out. Get Christ to take your hand again and get him to re-introduce you to the divine Lord of all. Ask his Spirit to come and dwell in your heart. The Holy Communion we will shortly share is about this reconnecting, this remembering, the bringing of the separated parts together again.
2. Pray—from a place of humility and openness—pray, talk to God, be at one with him. Every day pray. Pray for situations where there is fracturing and conflict. Pray for unity and wholeness. In the end unity and wholeness are about being not the imposition of an action either on others or ourselves.
3. Model humility, repentance, love and mercy. Be those pillars in your life and in the life of others around you.
4. Find a way to bring wholeness to a situation – where there is anger bring patience, where there is stress bring calm, where there is despair bring hope – you get the picture. If you cannot get beyond your own frustration, fear or resentment then get some help. In any conflicted situation the answer is always in your own being.
5. Support a cause that has as its focus reconciliation and wholeness. Serve that cause through your time and money. Here is an example for you....
6. Tell others about God’s love and joy. Tell them that wholeness and the healing of estrangement is possible. Give them hope. Tell them in word and deed but tell them from your perspective. Tell them your story. There is no right way to tell it. No one story is better than anyone else’s. It is said that our lives are the last book of the bible, we are the last revelation. Tell your story, your unique, important, never to be repeated story.

Being a minister of reconciliation is a great honour – and what an extraordinary and wonderful purpose in life. Being an ambassador for Christ and the wholeness he brings is a task to be approached with humility and gratitude. Don’t even begin to think you are not up to it—you are – you, like all Christians are called to this ministry – so I entreat you, I beg you, be reconciled to God and bring reconciliation to others.