

Reconciliation

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A — 12 February, 2023

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Deuteronomy 10.12-22; Psalm 119.1-8; 1 Corinthians 3.1-9; Matthew 5.21-37.

On occasion in his letters, Paul calls for a mature faith among his correspondents. It is something we are always striving for here in this parish. It is difficult to *describe* exactly what a 'mature faith' might look like. I think we know it when we experience it, but we can also recognise a faith that lacks a certain maturity.

There are few things that will upset an adolescent more than by a parent saying, 'I know what's good for you.' I believe us all to be children of God, but for some of us, including me from time to time, I do wonder sometimes if 'adolescent of God' might be a more apt description. When I reflected on today's reading from Deuteronomy, there was familiarity in its call for justice, unity, loyalty, and obedience. But there was also something unfamiliar: 'you are to do things for your own well-being.' Now, there is no sense of this text being about salvation . . . do these things and you will go to heaven or win God's favour. There is also no sense in this reading being about law; there are no demands. The writer simply tells us this is good for you.

The idea of 'well-being' is something that has its way into our corporate world and now into the church. On Tuesday the clergy will gather in conference, and I noticed one of the items on the agenda is clergy well-being! It has been couched rather unfortunately as 'well-being requirements.' We demand these of you for own your well-being! I can feel the adolescent in me stirring! I am convinced that the clergy need look no further than the commitments they made at their ordination to find their well-being well covered. We are required to be diligent in prayer, obedient to those set in authority over us, studious, faithful in administering word and sacrament.

A new requirement for our well-being is to meet with a professional supervisor. I have long followed a rule that requires of me to engage in the sacrament of reconciliation and to meet with a spiritual director. These, along with my ordination vows, have served my well-being, well. But they are very unfashionable.

'And pray for me, a sinner too.' So ends the rite of reconciliation a little used resource today, which is a shame, because it is one of the gems in our prayer book. Rowan Williams an expert, among other things, on the desert fathers, writes of an encounter between two monastic fathers. The first was Macarius, famous in that time as a man of God, humble, gracious, and loving. The other, was Theopemptus, who exhibited a rather judgmental self-righteousness that discouraged those who visited him and sought his counsel:

When they were alone together, the older man, Macarius asked, 'and how are things going with you?' Theopemptus replied, 'thanks to your prayers, all is well.' The old man asked, "Do you not have to battle with your fantasies?" He answered, 'No, up to now all is well.' He was afraid to admit anything. But the old man said to him, "I have lived for many years as an ascetic and everyone sings my praises, but, despite my age, I still have trouble with fantasies.' Theopemptus said, 'Well, it is the same with me, to tell the truth.'

Reconciliation is a bit of a buzz word; it has been for some time. In our context, the reconciliation of this land's indigenous peoples with those who have come later is crucial to this nation's future. And yet we have failed to advance this project; it could be argued that we

have gone backwards. Indeed, the longer that this issue continues to fester the worse it will get. So it is with any divisiveness; the longer reconciliation is delayed, the worse the situation.

Part of the problem I would argue is that confession has become very unfashionable. Now I am not advocating the idea of going to confession on a Saturday afternoon, queuing up before sitting in a confessional with a priest behind a screen. I do not believe this practise is beneficial and I doubt it has any place in Anglican thought. What I am advocating, though, is the idea of reconciliation. This is not a juridical process, someone seemingly sitting in judgement over you, but a process whereby there is an exchange, a recognition of the human condition and the comfort of a sense of both absolution and unity. It is something that serves our well-being.

Listening to the proclamation of that lengthy reading from Matthew's gospel today, there this is danger that we might actually hear very little. Perhaps the words 'divorce', 'unchastity', 'adultery' might be the first to catch your attention. But if you study this scripture and place it firmly within the context of the Sermon on the Mount and the gospel tradition, what you should hear clearly is 'be reconciled with one another'.

This passage' following on from the Beatitudes in which Jesus turns things upside down' challenges us to consider who indeed are blessed. In a similar vein' Jesus asks us to carefully contemplate those things that 'come naturally'. Those things that seemingly bubble up in us, that can surprise us—the remnant of the adolescence within us. The anger, the judgemental comment, the white lie, the unworthy thought. Jesus warns us that, yes, these are things that on occasions seem to 'come naturally'. But that doesn't mean that they shouldn't concern us, these things are not good for our well-being.

These are things that we rarely speak of openly, but they are matters that can be brought to light in an act of reconciliation. There are few things that demonstrate more our maturity, few things that serve our well-being, more than reconciliation.

Reconciliation means being preparing to be open to truth. I think Jesus' message is clear: we begin with the matters of the heart—things that come naturally—and from there we can deal with relationships. We can even then deal with the issues that seem intractable. We are dealing with one such issue today in our nation and, reading St Paul, there is a sense in which dealing with this issue will be for us a sign of our maturity. May we not be found wanting. Amen.