

# Reconciliation

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2: 11-22

Mark 6: 30-34 and 53-56

It is the bloody bits of the Old Testament that we always remember. Some of them we like – you can always get away with telling a room of schoolchildren how little David defeated the giant Goliath. But when we come to the massacres, even the genocides, we start to feel uneasy.

There is violence in the Old Testament and there is nationalism as the Jews create a country for themselves after they have fled from slavery in Egypt, cross the desert and entered the Promised Land. That's what we remember.

But there is another strand running through the Old Testament that we notice less often. There is a strand of writing, of thought, that sees the other, sees the stranger, the alien, not as a threat but as an opportunity. Not as an enemy but as a friend. One of the earliest hints of this is one of the most surprising. What we know about the relationship between the Hebrews and the Egyptians is that Egyptians oppressed the Hebrews, compelled them to make bricks without straw, ordered the murder of all the Hebrew baby boys - from which Moses miraculously escaped. What we can forget is that the Israelites entered Egypt as refugees in a time of drought. They were hungry and the Pharaoh offered them asylum, hospitality. For four centuries the Israelites were given a home, made welcome by the Egyptians. And that continued until, in the words of the author Exodus

There came to power in Egypt a new king  
who had never heard of Joseph.

Ex 1:6

The rest is well known. The Israelites were enslaved and through the power of God, working in Moses, were rescued. As part of the rescue mission God gave his people a set of laws setting out how they were to live together as a nation. And the time they spent as refugees in Egypt had a crucial impact on how these laws were formulated.

You shall also love the stranger, *for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Deut 10:17-19

A thousand years later the message was the same, this time from the prophet Jeremiah:

If you ... do not oppress the alien... then I will dwell with you ....

Jer 7:5-7

Perhaps the greatest exhortation to respect foreigners comes in a lovely story – that of Ruth. The point of the story is that Ruth, a foreign woman, put her trust in God, survived famine and prospered. And there is more – her great grandson, David, becomes Israel's greatest king and, according to St Matthew, a more distant descendent, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Messiah, the Christ. King David and Jesus Christ are both descendents of a foreigner.

After the time of the kings we enter the time of the prophets who exhibit an increasing tendency to call for reconciliation. They are concerned less with the Jewish separateness and more with the need to reach out to other nations. We have already heard from Jeremiah. This is how Zechariah put it:

In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'

Zechariah 8:23

This is the tradition, taken from the Old Testament, that St Paul built on in his letter to the Ephesians. This is a joyful letter. Unlike Christians in Galatia and Corinth, the Christians in Ephesus have grasped the heart of the Gospel, and St Paul writes not to rebuke but to affirm to encourage:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

Eph 1:15

What he goes on to write is an extraordinary optimistic vision:

- those who were far away have been brought together
- he has broken down the wall between us
- he has created one new humanity
- we are no longer stranger and aliens

When I hear these words, key moments of history come flashing into my mind, notably the destruction of the Berlin wall and the way people in Germany climbed over the rubble; the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the crumbling of apartheid.

Perhaps there are different public or political memories that come to your mind. Perhaps there are personal or family memories of when walls came crashing down.

Paul's letter is Good News. Christ has broken down barriers. But it is more than that. We are the body of Christ. It is our calling in the world to continue this ministry. We are called to break down barriers.

It is true in political life. So when Archbishop Desmond Tutu became chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa he was acting in a specifically Christ like way. When, in the 1980s and 1990s women and men in Northern Ireland committed themselves to work to peace in a province dominated by violence and alienation they were acting in a specifically Christ like way.

So where might we be called to act in a Christ like way in our own society? Where might we be called to work for reconciliation? At a political level it is very clear that there is urgent need in our relationship with the European Community and in the relationship between those of different views in our own country. The right to political disagreement is essential but there is no right to personal animosity; there is no right to accuse political opponents of dishonesty without evidence. Our government has an immensely difficult task in leaving the EU and we need to respect that regardless of how we voted in the referendum. But we also need to respect those whom we are leaving, as it were. Police have been warned to expect a rise in hate crime next March when we leave the European Union. They expect that a political act will result in personal violence. We as Christians, in the way we speak, need to do our bit to make sure it does not happen.

But that's the easy bit. There is a story of a married couple who are asked who makes the decisions in their marriage. The wife replies

"O that's simple. We divide them up. I make the minor decisions like where we go on holiday, when we change our car, where we live, where we send

the kids to school; but my husband makes the important decisions like whether the country should go to war."

Being generous to foreigners is only the start. The real work comes in being reconciled to our friends, to members of our own family, to members of this congregation. If there are rifts and divisions in our own personal lives we need to work for reconciliation. If we cannot do that we cannot be effective in what we do politically. As Jesus said

First take the plank out of your own eye before you attempt to remove the speck from your neighbour's

Matthew 7:5

Christ has already died to bring about that reconciliation:

- those who were far away have been brought together
- he has broken down the wall between us
- he has created one new humanity
- we are no longer stranger and aliens

We are called to put that into effect. We need to be careful how we do this. I was once in a church meeting where one person generously and publicly announced to a second person that she forgave her. The difficulty was that the second woman did not believe she had done anything wrong. Fortunately the second woman was also a very open minded woman. Perhaps reconciliation begins in our own hearts. If I am estranged from another person I can begin by praying for that person's good. And praying for another person's good means I have to stand in his or her shoes. I have to see the world from his or her point of view. That means I may begin to understand why the other person finds me difficult.

If the attempt at reconciliation goes no further than that, something will have been achieved for my attitudes will change, the way I deal with the other person will change.

But I may want to go further. If I do not normally speak to the other person I may try to do so. The conversation may not be profound but it is the small talk that lays the foundations.

And there is another tool in building reconciliation. That's the word 'sorry'. 'Sorry seems to be the hardest word' sang Elton John. Sorry may also be the most Christlike word. It is Christlike because it is an act of humility. When the woman in my last parish announced 'I forgive you' she was not acting in a Christlike manner: she was assuming that she was in the right and the other in the wrong. If she had truly forgiven her she would not have said 'I forgive you'. She would have said 'sorry. She would have accepted her responsibility for her part in the breakdown of their relationship.

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22nd July 2018