



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Dr Tim Howles

Reading: Colossians 1:17-23

¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

²¹ And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, ²³ provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Introduction

In 1985, inspired by the efforts of Bob Geldof the year before, a number of American musicians recorded a charity song called *We Are the World*. You might remember it! It sold over 20 million copies, raising a great deal of money for famine relief in Africa. One of the artists who got involved with the song was Bob Dylan. But after the recording, he told a reporter that he had been uncomfortable singing it. When asked why, he replied as follows: "because songs can't save the world and man can't save himself. We need some deeper reconciliation".

Reconciliation is one of the great themes of life. It's one of the great themes of Christianity. And it's right there in the middle of the reading we just had from Colossians.

And I'd us to think about it for a moment this morning. Two points for you: first, the need for reconciliation; second, the way of reconciliation.

1. The Need for Reconciliation

Life is complicated, isn't it! We have arguments; we get upset; we fall out. I think that's part of human existence, isn't it? And so we all need a dose of reconciliation in our lives from time to time (or sometimes quite often).

But when this passage speaks of "reconciliation", it isn't in the first instance referring to reconciliation between two people. It's referring to reconciliation between God and man. That's why it says:

Through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile *to himself* all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (1:20)

Now, I think it's quite natural to ask the question: why on earth would I need to be reconciled to God? I've not particularly had a falling out with Him, have I?

But what does the Bible say?

We were created, it says, to be in a close, intimate, loving relationship with God. Do you remember Adam and Eve in the garden? They would walk with Him, side-by-side, in the cool of the afternoon, talking and enjoying His company. Can you imagine?

And yet, as you remember from the story, human beings chose to give that up. Adam and Eve turned away from God. They wrenched themselves out from His loving-embrace. They pushed away the closeness and the intimacy they had enjoyed before. And so they were shut out from the garden.

The Bible calls that "sin". Oh, that's not a word we like to use these days, is it! Or, if we do, we tend to downplay it. *Oh sure*, we say, *there are a few sins in my life, but nothing major!* But that's to misunderstand what the word means. Sin does not refer to the little things we do wrong, whether large or small. It refers to a broken relationship. And, however good we like to think we are, the Bible says: "*all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

When I was 17 years old, I had a girlfriend. To be honest with you, she was way out of my league. But she'd agreed to go out with me! So I needed to borrow my dad's car to take her somewhere that evening. So I went up to him and asked: *dad, can I use the car tonight? OK fine*, he said, *but would you mind washing it first?* Well, I couldn't be bothered to do that, of course (I was 17!) So I said: *come on, dad, I don't want to wash the car, just let me use it, will you?* And he said: *actually no, that's the deal: if you want to use the car, you've got to wash it.*

Well, I realized he was serious! So I stormed out of the room; I huffed-and-puffed; I grabbed a sponge; I threw some water over the car; I dropped the bucket on the floor and kicked it; and I went up to my room in a strop.

What just happened? Well, in one sense I did what my father said. But the attitude was all wrong. I didn't wash the car out of a sense of love and respect for him; I was thinking only of myself.

Can you relate to that? This week, this morning, even in the last half-hour, have you lived with God at the centre of your life? Has He been your first thought in the morning and your last thought at night? Even in the good things you have sought to do, have you acted in such a way as to please Him? Or have you been what Augustine called “*incurvatus in se*”, curved-in on yourself, thinking of yourself first, and God a distant second, if at all?

You’ll never understand the good news of Christianity if you don’t first understand its diagnosis. It tells us that something is broken in our relationship with God our Creator. Here in Colossians it says we are “estranged and hostile in mind” (1:21). Jesus likened it to a young man who insulted his father and found himself in a far-off land, sitting in a pigsty, feeling thoroughly miserable. And so is it any wonder that the core question of the Bible, and of our whole existence, is the one that Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians: “we implore you on Christ’s behalf”, he says, “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

2. The Way of Reconciliation

Which leads us on to the second point: *how* can we be reconciled with God? What is the way of reconciliation?

For some people, the answer to this question is easy-peasy! They parrot the words of Voltaire: “God will forgive, it’s his job”.

But is it really that simple?

Think about your own life for a moment. Maybe you can think of a time when you’ve been wronged by someone; you’ve been on the receiving-end of harsh words or gossip; you’ve been hurt—and that relationship becomes broken.

How are you to be reconciled?

It seems to me there are two ways:

- Either, that person comes to you and says: *I’m sorry* (and then the relationship can be healed).
- Or, that person does not come to you and say sorry, but you forgive them anyway.

What just happened? In the first case, the person who broke the relationship takes on the burden by agreeing that they were wrong. But in the second case, you take on the burden, by forgoing your right to be angry, to bear a grudge, and so on. Do you see the point? Reconciliation is not easily won. For the relationship is to be healed, someone has to take on the burden.

On 14 January 2003, a police unit in Manchester was called to a house in the north of the city to arrest three suspected terrorists. During the course of the operation, one of the officers, DC Stephen Oake, was stabbed eight times by an assailant. He died some hours later in hospital. You may remember the story in the press; it was widely reported at the time. As it happens, Stephen’s family were Christians. And his father, Robin, has spoken about it many times since (I’ve heard him in person). And here’s what he says:

I have been able to forgive the man who killed my son. I managed to do that. And I'm glad I did. But the gift of that forgiveness was not easy to offer. I had to forgo my right to hate him forever. It took me about a year to do it. And the process of getting there nearly destroyed me.

When a relationship is truly broken, where real alienation exists, reconciliation is not easily won. It costs something.

The good news of Christianity is that God is willing to pay that price for you. On the cross, Jesus took on the burden of the forgiveness that we need. And it cost Him so much. It nearly destroyed Him. But He did that for you. And for all those who wish to receive it as a gift, he says: you can come back to the Father through me. That's why in our passage it says:

You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before the Father. (1:22)

What kind of Jesus do you have? Is he a teacher who will help you understand the world better? Is he a good man who will inspire you to live better? Or is he a Saviour, who gave His life as a "ransom", to do what nothing else in the world could ever do—to restore your relationship with the God who made you, so that you can enjoy His presence for all eternity?

That's what this service of Eucharist is crying out to you. And when you truly understand that, when the penny drops, your life will be radically changed forever.

Bob Dylan was right: "some deeper reconciliation" is needed. And it is there for you in Christ, a free gift for all who believe. Will you take it? Will you share it with others?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon preached on Sunday 21 July 2019, the Fifth Sunday of Trinity