

“Reconciliation”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

13th February 2011

Matthew 5:21-37, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

My theme this morning arises out of the first piece of Jesus' teaching in today's gospel reading, and from our 1 Corinthians reading.

One of the most fulfilling experiences a minister can have is when we are able to contribute to a reconciliation between people whose relationships are breaking down or who have become completely estranged or hostile to one another. It doesn't happen very often, I must admit, but perhaps two or three times a year I'm engaged with someone who's having difficulty in relating with someone else - a husband and wife, a parent and son or daughter, work colleagues, volunteers who've fallen out - and sometimes, not always, you have the joy of seeing relationships improve and even complete reconciliation. Always such an outcome requires a lot of personal self-awareness, listening, humility, complete honesty, courage and generosity - from both parties.

Jesus has something to say to us in these situations. First he speaks about the seriousness of broken relationships. He starts the topic by referring to murder - an extreme example of broken relationship to say the least! Then he likens that to people being angry with each other, to insults and bad-mouthing. And he puts the onus on each one of us to be aware if someone has something against us - "if you remember that your brother or sister (meaning your fellow-Christian) has something against you", then you are to go and seek reconciliation. I find this intriguing. In my experience it's usually the injured party, the one who feels the hurt most, the one who's been insulted, the one who sees themselves as victim, who comes first seeking help. But Jesus is saying to us "is there a person who has something against you?", and if the answer is yes, then you are to take the initiative, not leave it to the other person who feels aggrieved towards you.

He then goes on to speak about people suing each other in court, and says you should come to terms with your accuser before getting into a court action. He's talking about redress here. Reconciliation with another may well cost us something - it might be something concrete to show the genuineness of our desire to be back in good relationship, or more usually it will be something more personal like willingness to acknowledge wrong, willingness to lose face, willingness to change your behaviour. And Jesus is saying that for the sake of reconciliation, for the healing of relationships, such costs are well worth paying. God wants us to live always in healthy positive relationships with each other.

Paul's teaching in first Corinthians today takes what Jesus says a step further. While Jesus was speaking about individual relationships, albeit within the Christian community, Paul applies this teaching to the church in Corinth. He writes in horror about the jealousy and quarrelling going on among them. He's appalled at their divisions. The church there at Corinth has divided into at least four groups - one house-church saying they're following Paul, another Peter, another Apollos, and one group which seem to think they're better than the others says "we're following Christ". Four denominations, if you like. In chapter one Paul shouts at them "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" And in today's passage he reminds them in no

uncertain terms that we are all mere servants of God, none of us can claim any merit in our own right, it is God who gives us worth by loving us and who grants us gifts with which we can serve him, it is God who brings the growth. And then he concludes by declaring “for we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building” and the you is plural. Togetherness, unity, reconciliation are amongst the highest values for us Christians.

How then are we to respond to such clear teaching, from Jesus and from his servant Paul? Surely in at least two ways:

- one, by searching our memories and our hearts and recalling if there’s someone in our family or in the family of Christ who “has something against us”; and taking an initiative to seek reconciliation; a first step, of course, might be simply to pray about that situation and seek God’s guidance; another early step might be to speak with a Christian friend about it before working out how to begin to address the issue with the aggrieved person;
- and two, by commitment to Christian unity; thank God we’ve come a long way in the last 50 or 60 years in breaking down denominational barriers between us; how uplifting it was last Tuesday morning at the opening of Parliament service to see Catholics, Anglicans, Unitings, Baptists, Churches of Christ, the Salvation Army, Presbyterians and Pentecostals all happily participating together in prayer and praise and worship of God; we are the one body of Christ; but what a long way we have to go to really fulfil God’s desire for God’s church to be one; tomorrow I fly off to Geneva for meetings of the World Council of Churches, where representatives of 349 member churches from across the world will struggle in our differences to reach common cause for the sake of God and for the sake of God’s world.

Here in this parish I’m pleased to acknowledge there are no real divisions among us. We do have a variety of viewpoints, differing emphases and a range of ideas among us, as demonstrated at yesterday’s very productive planning morning, but those differences are valued rather than denigrated - for we accept that all have a contribution to make to the life and mission of the church. We may be different, but we are together, we are united.

Reconciliation - people relating together in mutual acceptance, love, acknowledging differences but unified nevertheless. It’s a high Christian value and goal. God wants it, God offers it to us, for the good news of Jesus is all about God’s gift of reconciliation. The closer we relate with God, the greater our capacity for reconciled unified relationships with each other. To the glory of God. Amen.