

Christ our Reconciliation

Date: 30 March 2025, 4th Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: The Cross of Christ

Texts: Hosea 11.1-11; 2 Corinthians 5.11-6.2; Colossians 1.15-23

When I was a boy growing up in PNG one of the features of life there was tribal warfare. In PNG culture there is a deep seated urge for a person to get revenge if they are injured. Someone steals a pig. Then the pig's owner goes and burns down the thief's house. The thief responds by killing the other person's wife. The violence spirals out and soon the tribes of the original parties are at war with each other. This continues until both sides have had enough of the bloodshed. But in order for there to be peace, what they called "compensation" has to be made. Everyone on both sides knows exactly what the score is. And because they are a communal culture the whole of both tribes pools their resources to pay back to the other compensation for each injury done. Only then would the two sides be reconciled.

In the West we might pride ourselves on being more civilised than such "primitive" societies, but if we take an honest look at ourselves, we're more similar than we'd dare to admit. The culture of my ancestors in northern Europe was marked by men seeking to restore wounded honour through violence. The grinding wars in Ukraine and Gaza are just 2 of violent conflicts across our globe. In the contemporary social and political landscape we are polarised and tribal. The algorithms of social media are set up to keep us in bubbles of people who agree with us, throwing verbal grenades at our enemies. Social media encourages virtual lynch mobs and produces a public square that has little time for due process, proportionality, mercy and truth. That was social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's assessment of the US in 2022.¹ That assessment sounds all the more true today!

Conflict seems everywhere in our experience of life. All too often though we only have a measure of peace because we've kept those we disagree with outside the room. How do you bury the hatchet when you've been wounded deeply? Maybe you're carrying hurts passed down and added to through the generations. I remember hearing an Aboriginal leader talk about reconciliation. He said, "If reconciliation is about the restoration of relationship, how can we talk about reconciliation in this country when there was no relationship to begin with?"

This is the 4th sermon in our Lenten series on the Cross of Christ. We're looking at different ways the Bible speaks about the Cross and what these teach us about what God has done for us through Christ's death. Today we're looking at the cross of Christ through the lens of reconciliation. This is how St Paul describes the cross in 2 Corinthians 5: "God was in Christ

¹ Jonathan Haidt, ['Why the Past 10 years of American Life have been uniquely stupid'](#), *The Atlantic*, May 2022

reconciling the world to himself.”² I don’t want to downplay the seriousness and complexity of the different issues of conflict that I’ve raised. Nor am I so foolish as to think I can offer a solution to them. But I do want to take seriously the Bible’s claim that there is an intrinsic connection between how we treat other people and how we treat God. And I hold on to the modest hope that as we encounter God’s reconciliation in Christ we would learn to live out that reconciliation within the church. And so we would be sent out as agents of reconciliation into this broken and divided world.

So where are we going? We’re going to look at those three texts, Hosea, Colossians and 2 Corinthians. We’ll chart a course from Hostility, to Reconciliation and then our Response.

Hostility

If Christ’s death brings reconciliation between God and the world that means that apart from his death there is a hostility between God and the world. In the Bible this enmity is focussed on humanity because of our place in God’s creation as his image bearers and vice-regents. Creation is tainted by our fall. And so our reconciliation with God affects the whole of creation. But I’m getting ahead of myself. The Bible’s claim is that the hostility and conflict that we experience as individuals and groups spring from a deeper hostility that we have towards God. Colossians 1.21 puts it like this:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

Notice three things here. Paul says that apart from Christ, in our natural state, left to our own devices, we are alienated from God. There is an abyss between us and God. What is the cause of this estrangement? Both our thoughts and our actions. “You were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.” Sin goes deeper than individual transgressions. God made us and loves us, but our minds are turned against God. Whether that is in outright hostility or simply indifference, we don’t honour God as we ought.

In the Bible the story of Israel’s relationship with God is representative of the whole of humanity before God. In Hosea 11 we read what that relationship is like.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.

They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms;
but they did not realize it was I who healed them.

I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love;

I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.

God here is pictured as a doting parent. He loves Israel like a son. He was there holding Israel’s hands while she learned to walk. He stooped down in tenderness to feed her. But how

² 2 Corinthians 5.19

did she respond to his love and affection? By running after other gods. “They sacrificed to the Baals and burned incense to images”. Here again we’re taken into one of the powerful ways the Bible describes sin - idolatry. We’re made to live in thankful dependence upon God, loving him as our good Father. Instead we turn away from God and worship and serve idols, false gods - either the self or things in creation like money or sex or power, things which are good in themselves, but cannot satisfy the soul.

This is the situation from humanity’s side of things. We are enemies of God. Hostile towards him. In conflict with him. There is hostility too from God’s side. He is Holy and Just. His eyes are too pure to look upon sin. He will not stand to see his good creation marred by evil. He will not leave the guilty unpunished. And so because we are enemies of God he has become our enemy. He is a threat to our claims of independence and self determination. The threat of righteous judgment hangs over us.

For Israel, Hosea wrote, v5

Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them
because they refuse to repent?
Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates
and put an end to their plans.

Humanity stands in contradiction to God and would be destroyed. But this is not the end of the story. Hosea continues, v8

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.
For I am God, and not man— the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.

God’s jealous love for his wayward children burns deep so that he comes not in wrath, but to bear his own wrath. To make peace. To end hostility. To bring reconciliation. How?

Reconciliation

We see the answer in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 19

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.

This is the first great moment of the atonement. God does not treat us as we deserve. He does not count our sin against us. But this is only because of the second greater moment, verse 21:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is the great exchange. Christ bears our sin, and we receive his righteousness. He takes what is ours and we receive what is his. God does not treat us as our sins deserve because in Christ he has taken them upon himself and on the cross he has suffered the just punishment for sin - death and separation from God. In Christ God has entered into the contradiction of humanity before God. Jesus stands in the breach. He stands with us as sinners and in our place representing us as sinners. He stands as man the sinner under the just judgment of God. He takes our sin and makes it his own so that it is no longer ours but his. On the cross he suffers the wrath of God upon sin.

How is peace made between warring tribes in PNG? Through an exact payment from both sides for the wounds inflicted. But here, in Christ, God makes the peace payment on our behalf. He does so because it is impossible for us to make it ourselves. The debt is too great. We are powerless of ourselves. Trapped in the falsehood of our contradiction against God. And having made peace through his blood, the conflict is over, peace has been made. The enemies come together and are reconciled.

When I do pre-marriage counseling with couples I always make sure we have a session on forgiveness. I do it because conflict is inevitable in marriage. Live with someone you love long enough and you will hurt them and they will hurt you. And so knowing how to forgive is vital for the long term health of a marriage. As we saw last week, forgiveness does not excuse the wrong done. Rather it recognises and condemns it as wrong, but says, "for the sake of the relationship, out of love, I will give up my right for revenge. I will not hold this against you." Of course for the relationship to continue forgiveness by the wounded party must be met with confession and repentance from the guilty party. There must be an acknowledgment of the wrong done and the wound inflicted. There must be a real commitment to change. When repentance and forgiveness meet there is reconciliation, a hope and a future. But I always ask couples, "Who is it that bears the cost of forgiveness? What do they do with the pain?" The answer is the wounded party. The one doing the forgiving absorbs the pain in their forgiveness rather than visiting it back on the guilty party.

We stand as the guilty party before God. In Christ he bears the cost of forgiving us. On the cross he absorbs the pain of the sins of all in order to offer forgiveness to all.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. If this is what God has done in Christ, what are the results of this reconciliation? The answers tumble out one on top of the other in both 2 Corinthians 5 and Colossians 1.

First, there is a radical change in who we are, our state before God. From Colossians we see we were alienated from God. We were unclean, soiled by sin, under the just sentence of death. Maybe you know that only too well. Maybe shame and guilt hang like a weight around your neck dragging you into the ground. Hear God's word to you today. If you trust in Christ

you have been reconciled through Christ's death and God welcomes you home as his child. And, Verse 22, God now presents you as holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. This is why Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 5.17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" Having been reconciled to God through Christ's death you are a new person. You have a whole new identity. And this is something no one can undercut or overthrow because it is guaranteed by God. In Christ you are a child of God. And that defines who you are and shapes how you live.

Response

If this is the reconciliation that Christ has purchased for us, how ought we to respond?.

First, I want to address those of you who are my sisters and brothers in Christ. Don't be like Israel was, running after the things of this world to give you life and hope and peace. God has given you these in Christ. Hear God speaking through the apostle to you today. Continue in your faith. Keep trusting Jesus. Don't move on from the hope held out in Christ.

Second, God has given us a particular vocation as his reconciled people. He calls us to be ambassadors for Christ and ministers of reconciliation. What do ambassadors do? They represent the government of their homeland in a foreign country. Christ is our king. He calls us to represent him to our neighbours and friends and in the communities in which we live and work. Whether you are conscious of this or not, if you own the name of Christ that's what you are doing. May God give us grace to represent him faithfully and winsomely.

Paul gives this particular focus: We are ministers of reconciliation. This means at least two things. First, We've been reconciled to God through Christ and so in our church we are called to be a people of peace and reconciliation. That means we're to be a community of diversity where the things which usually divide us are put aside and relativised because God has made us one body in Christ. That's the spiritual reality, expressed as we greet each other with the Lord's peace, and share together in the one bread. We are called to make every effort to keep that bond of peace in the messiness of our life together. We are called to be gentle, humble, and patient, to bear with one another in love. We are called to forgive as the Lord forgave us.³

Second, Jesus calls us to be peacemakers.⁴ As we learn how to be people of peace and reconciliation in church so we carry this as we're sent out from church. In our fractured and divided world, how can we be agents of healing? Our culture so desperately needs us to be people who are not drawn into the agendas of the left or right, but who are ministers of reconciliation. In a society where those who disagree with the narrative and morals of the tribe are written off, we are called to stand as those who see all people through the lens of the cross - each one loved by God, for whom Christ died.

³ Ephesians 4.2-3, 32, cf. Romans 12:14-19

⁴ Matthew 5.9

Finally, let me speak to those of you who are here but aren't Christians. Outside of Christ you remain alienated and an enemy of God. But Christ has taken your place in the cross and made peace between you and God. You only need to trust him. The Father is standing with arms outstretched to welcome you home. Ask and you will receive his forgiveness. Enter into that reconciliation. Hear St Paul speaking to you directly across the ages: "We are ... Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Later in the service we will say a prayer of confession. You could make that yours for the first time today. Christ offers you the assurance of his forgiveness in the bread and the wine we will share. You could come to the Lord's Table and receive Christ today. The cup of salvation could be yours today. If you want to talk more about this please come and speak to me or someone you trust at church today.