

Ministers of Reconciliation

Date: 2 August 2020, 8th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's online

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2; Isaiah 49:8-18

Earlier this year, while we were all in lockdown, the book club I go to read Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*. It's about the experience of Oran, a town on the Algerian coast. The bubonic plague breaks out and their gates are shut to the outside world. As the deaths increase the characters of the novel grapple with life as an endless series of defeats. As the novel closes, the central character, Rieux, describes a "family likeness" between all the citizens of the town. All their faces tell of a "long banishment from a distant homeland." They long for a "reunion with something they [can't define] ... for want of a better name they ... [call] it peace."

"...they had suffered together, in body no less than in soul, from a cruel leisure, exile without redress, thirst that was never slaked."

Rieux sums up the shared experience of the plague:

the only certitudes [everyone] had in common - love, exile, and suffering.¹

There are different interpretations of the novel, but for my money it is a meditation on the human condition. Exile and suffering are our common human experience at all times, not just during a pandemic. We all long for these to be met and overcome by love and peace. At one point, one of the characters, Tarrou, reflects on his life in these words:

I have realised that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace.²

The plague it seems is a metaphor for what the Bible calls *sin*. We experience life as exile and suffering is because we all have the plague. We are all fallen. With our first parents we're cast out of paradise into a world marred by suffering and death.

The apostle Paul lived in the same world as we do, a world of suffering and exile. But a crack has opened in the pitiless walls of this world, that brings the light of love and peace and reconciliation. Paul himself experienced that light breaking through the clouds on the road to Damascus. He met the risen Jesus and his life was totally transformed. He turned from killing Christians, to preaching Christ to the nations.

If you've just joined us, we've been studying Paul's 2nd letter to the church in Corinth over the past few months at St George's. It's a very personal letter where Paul defends his ministry to a church with which he had a very rocky relationship. Through this defense he teaches them just how the good news of Jesus shapes who he is and what he does and how it might shape their lives and ours too. The theme of the letter is God's Power in Our Weakness. Last week we saw the incredible Hope that Jesus offers us in the face of death with the promise of the resurrection. In our text today, Paul says his ministry is all about reconciliation. Reconciliation speaks to that sense of exile and alienation we all experience. In Jesus, God reconciles us to himself. He searches out the exiles, even you and me and brings us home.

¹ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, (trans. Stuart Gilbert), Penguin, 1960: 243-4, 246

² *The Plague*, 206

And that is something you and I need whether you are Christian or checking the whole Christianity business out.

We'll look at 3 points. Motivation for Ministry (11-15), Perspective on People (16-17), and Ministry of Reconciliation (18-6:2)

Motivation for Ministry (11-15)

Read with me verse 11.

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. Two things motivate Paul: the fear of the Lord and the love of Christ. What does it mean to fear the Lord? Not all fear is bad. When there is a shark, it's a healthy fear that drives you out of the water. In verse 10 we saw that we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. There is a day when God will bring in his perfect justice and heal this broken world. And we do not want to be found on the wrong side of that justice. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.³ Paul wants those to whom he preaches to be able to stand confident and not ashamed on that day.

But how does that fear relate to love? Have a look at verse 14.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.

The Bible says that God is love. But that is not some abstract and warm fuzzy feeling. God's love for us is expressed in flesh and blood in the death of Christ for us. In Romans Paul writes,

God demonstrates his love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.⁴

Here Paul says that Christ died for all. This is the universal scope of the cross. Christ's arms are outstretched, bearing the sins of the whole world. No one and nothing is beyond the reach of his love, not even you. That love is also personal. One of my favourite verses in the Bible is Isaiah 49.15-16, that we read earlier.

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!"

See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
That is God's love for you. On the cross he engraved your name on his hands.

What does it mean when Paul says that all died? Jesus stands as the representative of all humanity, accomplishing for us what we could not do for ourselves, such that what has happened to him has happened to us. The disobedience of the first Adam has been brought to an end in the death of the second Adam. As we have died with Christ, so we now live with him. Paul goes on, verse 15.

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

³ Hebrews 10:31

⁴ Romans 5:8

The obedience of the Christian life flows from our experience of the cross. The cross radically decentres us. Instead of the world orbiting around us, we now orbit around Christ.

When you experience the love of Christ, you can't help but share it.

I remember being at a dinner party where some friends were taking me to task for sharing about Jesus. I can't remember exactly what they said, but it was something like this: "It's such an arrogant position to take. How can you say that you're right and others are wrong? You've no right to force your religion on others." While I fumbled for an answer, another friend, who wasn't a Christian, said, "I think you're looking at it the wrong way. If you genuinely believe this is the best news in the world, why wouldn't you want to share it with your friends?" That's what is going on for Paul. That unbounded, infinite love of God drove him to proclaim Christ and persuade women and men. He would not have us fall on the day of judgment but rather that we would know the love of Christ now and so have our lives transformed.

Perspective on people (16-17)

I think there are a number of fears behind my friend's comments. One is that in trying to persuade others of the Christian faith I am being judgmental. Another is that I am saying my culture is better than yours, that I am better than you. It's a pride that dehumanises the other. Paul however says that Jesus gives you a radically different perspective on people. Have a read from verse 16.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

To regard someone in a worldly way is to use any or all of the categories of 'us and them' to push me up and you down: family, gender, ethnicity, wealth, age, ability, education, politics, sexuality, whatever it is. The cross is a radical leveler. It says we are all so sinful Jesus had to die for us, but we are all so loved that he was glad to die for us. That shatters our pride and gives us great confidence. Through the cross I find that you and I are plague-ridden, but even more we are loved by God.

And as we come to Christ, we are remade. Your past failures, the wounds you have received, the things you are ashamed of, the secrets you hope no one will ever know, they do not define you and they need not bind you. Jesus does. The old has gone. The new has come. If you trust in him, he will free you and make you new.

Ministry of Reconciliation (18-21)

One reason that people sometimes give for keeping religion, and especially Christianity out of the public square is the fear that it will cause division and hatred. I know many of you grew up when Catholics and Protestants would walk on opposite sides of the street. I'm thankful that that has not been my experience of Australian life. I can't speak for other faiths, but when churches and individuals stoke hatred and division they are acting contrary to the heart of the Christian faith.

The New Testament uses different pictures to speak of the meaning of Jesus' death. Here Paul speaks of it in terms of Reconciliation.

Have a read with me verse 18.

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

We all have the plague, Tarrou says. The effects of the plague are suffering and exile. One of Jesus' most famous stories is the Prodigal Son. It's about not just one, but two boys who are estranged, alienated from their father. The younger is alienated because he takes his share of his father's wealth and squanders it on wild living. The older stays at home and does all the right things, but he too is estranged because of his pride. He thinks he has earned his father's wealth and he resents his father's generosity when his little brother comes home. We're all like the younger and the older brother in our way.

But God has reconciled us to himself through Christ. How? First by not counting men's sins against them. And second, read with me verse 21.

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

Here is the incredible exchange at the heart of reconciliation. On the cross, Jesus, the only perfectly innocent one, takes our sin, every evil thought, every cruel deed, that you and I and every person has done, he takes them and makes them his own. He takes our sin. He takes our guilt. He takes our shame. So they are no longer yours but his.

And this is God at work in Christ, because Jesus was not merely human, he is God come in the flesh. He willingly shoulders that impossible burden, for you and for me because he loves you. Your name is engraved on the palm of his hand with every blow hammering the nails in. His love brings us peace. You see, the truth of the cross is that Jesus entered into the exile and suffering of our existence and made it his own so that we might be reconciled to God and brought home. He was forsaken that you might be accepted. He was rejected that you might be reconciled.

And so Paul sees his ministry as a ministry of reconciliation. Of course from this reconciliation with God flows a reconciliation with others. In Christ we meet our enemy and find a sister, a brother. Jesus calls us as God's reconciled people to be peacemakers. And our divided and polarised world needs this so much. But for each of us it starts here, at the cross. Will you lay down your weapons and receive the reconciliation with God that Christ has won?

This is the great treasure that you carry if you're a follower of Jesus - wonderful news of reconciliation with God through Jesus. As Paul says, you are Christ's ambassadors.

This is the heartbeat of Christian ministry, of my job - the ministry of reconciliation.

20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

So today, as Christ's ambassador, let me ask you, have you accepted Jesus and the reconciliation he brings? Or are you standing on the wrong side of God's justice? And if you have received Jesus' reconciliation, does that reconciliation shape your whole life? How you treat others, those who rub you the wrong way, those you're fighting with, the people who maybe look a bit different or speak a different language, or who hold different political views.

If you haven't received God's forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ, with Paul, I implore you, be reconciled to God. Listen to Paul's words,

As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. 2 For he says,
"In the time of my favor I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you."

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

In a moment I'm going to pray a prayer asking to receive that reconciliation. We don't do this every Sunday at St George's, but it's what God is telling us to today in his Word. Maybe you've had a sense that God is calling you today. You know that you stand in exile, estranged from God. You've been running from him; you've been trying to show him how good you are, but today you want to come home and fall into his arms. If that's you, I invite you to join me in this prayer. It's very simple - Thank You. Sorry. Please.

Dear Jesus. Thank you that you love me. Thank you that you died on the cross for me. Thank you for taking my sin and making it yours. Sorry for running my life my own way. Sorry for rejecting you as King and living for myself. Please forgive me. I want to follow you. Please give me your Holy Spirit to help me live as God's child. Amen.