

Reconciliation

Pentecost 12 – 4th September 2011

Reading:

Matthew 18: 15-20

As many of you would know, Jenny and I love films. Like many of you we belong to Launceston's wonderful Film Society and we have a unique way of rating the films we see. Or rather I'm the one who does this particular rating. Much to Jenny's amusement, I rate films by the hanky. For me a film can be either a one, two or three hanky film, depending on how wet my hanky is at the end of it. I confess I like a good cry at the movies. And there is nothing more calculated to have me weep copiously than a good old story of reconciliation. Father-son, husband-wife, brother-sister, former enemies, it matters little. Reconciliation for me is what life is all about. It's what the gospel is all about.

But you know it's not as easy as many of my much loved films make out, for reconciliation is a risky business. It takes courage to leave yourself open to the possibility of further rejection and hurt. So in real life many of us do not get around to it. Our egos can be so big that we don't want to give an inch. "Why should I be the one to grovel, I'm the one who's been hurt." So we stubbornly contrive to live in alienation from whomsoever we have fallen out with.

In C.S. Lewis' satire, "The Great Divorce", Lewis takes us with a busload of ghosts who have made a day-trip from hell to heaven with a view to remaining there permanently. They meet the citizens of heaven, the 'solid people'. And one very Big Ghost is astonished to find in heaven a man who on earth was tried and executed for murder. "What I'd like to understand," he explodes, "is what you're here for, as pleased as Punch, you a murderer, while I've been walking the streets down there in Hell and living in a pigsty of a place all these years." The solid person tried to explain that he had been forgiven, that both he and the man he had murdered had been reconciled at the judgement seat of God. But the Big Ghost isn't having any of it. The injustice of the situation staggers him. "My rights!" he keeps shouting. "I've got to have my rights same as you, see!" "Oh no," the solid person assures him. "it's not as bad as that. I haven't got my rights or I shouldn't be here. You will not get yours either. You will get something far better."

No. Reconciliation is a hard business, when you forgo your rights for the sake of the relationship.

And that's why we have this little gospel message, where Matthew points specifically to the ministry of reconciliation within his church community.

In every church I have had been in, as a lay person and as an ordained person, people fall out. And if you're like me and don't like conflict, there is always a great temptation to do nothing. To let the matter fester. It happens in churches, it happens in families and it happens in marriages. And fester it does. Relationships, if not severed by one party leaving, are never the same, the hurt always disrupts the relationship.

So Jesus, whose total mission was to reconcile, offers some practical advice. If you are at odds with a brother or sister go to them and have it out. And more often than not, it works itself out. I know, for I've done it more than once. But it's not easy leaving behind your own grievances, but if you want reconciliation enough, you leave your ego at home. I constantly have to remind myself about "I" statements. If *I* want to be reconciled the best place to start is with *my* behaviour and not pointing to what the other has done to injure me. In other words, my rights are not as important as the relationship. Every successful marriage exists on this level. Even in the best of marriages there are times when we hurt each other. If the relationship is important enough to us we will sit together and let our love work it out. In churches it is the same. If a brother or sister hurts another, first go to them. And I've seen it work in this congregation. There is no point in taking offense, going off in the huff or coming to the minister to complain unless you yourself have actually approached the one who has injured you.

But if you've tried and still are eager to have the relationship restored you then get someone else to go with you. It happens in marriages, if the couple want the relationship to continue - counselling is available.

It happens in congregations, where someone outside the conflict comes and listens and acts as reconciler. It's time in today's culture that we took reconciliation seriously and this message from Matthew 18 is bedrock for the basic principles. The passage is severely practical as well as being ruthlessly idealistic. Not a bad combination.

And on a societal level we see the results of not practicing reconciliation: suicide bombers, campaigns of terror, heavy handed repression of occupying forces. There will have to be a lot of reconciliation if Libya is not to erupt into a bloodbath. The sort of reconciliation that Mandela brought to his nation South Africa.

And on a more personal level we see broken marriages, fractured families, feuds between neighbours and divided churches. Many of us pretend there is no problem. We can refuse to face the facts, swallow our anger or resentment papering over the cracks carrying on as normal. But it isn't normal, is it?

So we have this wise advice from Matthew, whose early church was no different to ours. It's advice that is relentless in its pursuit of reconciliation. If the face to face doesn't work and the witnesses can't bring about reconciliation, the community is encouraged to treat the person in the same manner as it would treat a Gentile or a tax-collector.

And given that Matthew himself was a tax-collector I can only assume he means that we must continue to display the grace shown to Matthew himself that led him to be reconciled to Jesus and his community.

And whilst these reconciliation guidelines would not satisfy a modern day mediator, they reflect an underlying passion for reconciliation that all who would follow Christ need to have. At its best, in individuals, in families, in church communities, it is a spiritually informed passion continually moving to construct a next step, a next possibility for the hardened heart to open, for new life to come.

In a few minutes we will gather around a table where we will be reminded of the reconciling presence of the Christ among us. We will pass the peace and I've always seen this as an excellent first step towards reconciliation, where Christ love and peace builds bridges within our fragile community.

So as we prepare to move into this sacrament of community, let me sing a verse from the hymn we are about to sing as a community.
It's a song for weddings but it is also a song of reconciliation.

***When love is tried as loved ones change
hold still to hope though all seems strange,
till ease returns and love grows wise
through listening ears and opened eyes.***

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4th September 2011
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