

## Reconciliation

We all know the story of the lost sons and the waiting Father, the so called prodigal son story. When I first saw that was the reading for today I was disappointed as it is such a rich story to preach on but Francis brought it to us on our first Sunday here, drawing out all the points I'd want to make. That was less than a year ago so a bit soon for me to remind you of them.

So I began to really look at the excerpt from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that we also have just heard. This is a passage full of verses that we all know, but usually out of context – such as 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' or we are ambassadors for Christ' or 'he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' How do we go about understanding a passage that seems to be so full of one-liners?

So I'm actually going to go through this passage bringing out the meaning of the passage as a whole – hopefully – and also showing how it relates really strongly to the gospel story Jesus told as well. So having a copy of the passage 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 in front of you might be of use.

There is one word repeated in this passage 5 times that threads right through what it is about. Reconciliation! What does that mean? Reconciliation is the restoring of relationship after conflict and separation. It is often used to refer to the restoration of friendly relations after a disagreement or restoration between communities that had become enemies. It is used also in accounting about getting things to agree. The root of the word in Latin means to make good again or repair. We can think of it here as being about repairing relationships that are broken. It is not just about reaching a truce but a totally restored relationship. In this passage it is about the relationship between God and his world, God and people, God and each one of us. What is the basic relationship that is being restored? It is the relationship we were intended to have when we were created – that is that we would be children of God as our heavenly Father – that we would together be the family of God. And God is our father in a way that is beyond any earthly ideas of father we might have. He is holy – other. So his being our father is like the best of human fatherhood but magnificently gloriously beyond the most loving relationship we could ever experience in human terms. And what we are as family is beyond our human experience too. I'll be coming back to this again and again but it's useful to hold this idea in the back of our minds as we read each part of the passage: that reconciliation with God is about becoming a child of God and being part of his family.

The passage begins:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

It is natural, when there is a major change in life circumstances, that our whole outlook can change. One obvious example of this is when a couple has their first baby, nothing will ever be the same again. They have new responsibilities and everywhere they go they see things with new eyes. The same for changing country as we discovered moving to Europe. Everything works differently and many rules for how things are supposed to happen are different. Unless you work those out you'll not manage living there. When there are totally new circumstances, a new way of living goes with it.

What Paul saw was God in action, meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and then experiencing being transformed, having his whole life changed. So everything looked different – Jesus himself - now his savior, and other people – all people God wants to relate with. We too, have seen God in action and now look at the world in a whole new way – very differently to those who do not know or acknowledge God's existence or that God matters. We don't see the world anymore from a human/fleshly point of view and we certainly don't see Jesus as just another human being or even as someone who didn't really exist as those around us might think. We know that God, the creator of the universe, has come into the world as a human being, Jesus, that he has died for us and that resurrection is a reality. The old world of sin and death and hopelessness is no longer our reality. We see things differently. There is a new creation! A whole new world where all is in relation to God whom we know in Christ.

In this new creation the things of our old life are no longer important to us. All the old things that separated us from God and from one another, the things that bring about conflict and division, in this new creation there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

Throughout this passage Paul repeats words to really emphasise what he is saying. In the second verse here he repeats 'new' and 'everything'. This can seem a bit much. Are we really completely new in Christ? Has everything for us, individually and communally, become new? The grammar here points to the idea of continuous creation. We are in a constant state of renewal. This is not an incremental change to produce a slightly improved upgrade. In Christ we experience God reaching out to us and our relationship with him being restored, continuously. It is not something we do ourselves. As he says in the next sentence – 'all this is from God'. It is God's desire for us, God's way for us, God's love for us that brings us into this restored relationship. We are called to step into what God makes possible. God not only transforms us but equips and entrusts to us his appeal for others to also step into the restored relationship with himself.

Everything has become new because we have this restored relationship to God through Jesus. We are now his children, part of God's family. This is something God does, and the story Jesus tells illustrates this well. The waiting father doesn't need the youngest son to spout out his apologies and his ideas for how he could be accepted back on the family farm. All he did was turn back towards his father. His father saw him and ran towards him before he said anything. God in Christ restored our family relationship with him and didn't count our trespasses, our mis-steps, against us.

The older son didn't accept the father's welcome to the younger and therefore wasn't open to the father's grace. We are not to be like the older son, rejecting the restoration of relationship, the reconciliation between the father and the son who had been separated from him.

The dramatic change in our circumstances is, like the younger son, due only to our openness to God restoring the relationship. That includes our openness to the truth that Christ came not only to die for us but also to die for all.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us

As members of God's family we have the role of inviting and welcoming others into his family too. Paul emphasizes again by repetition - We have been given the ministry of reconciliation, been entrusted with the message of reconciliation, been appointed ambassadors for Christ. God is making his appeal for all to be reconciled to him through us. What a responsibility!

How does the next verse fit in here? The next verse actually adds to this.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

What does it mean – we become the righteousness of God? This relates back to the first verses in this passage. With everything becoming new for us in God's new creation, in this restored relationship we have with God our father, we live in a new way. Our actions become such that others also experience the nature and reality of the transforming power of a loving father God. We embody God's faithfulness to his covenant, God's love reaching out to put things right in his world, his kingdom of justice and righteousness being restored through people becoming part of his family. The New Testament is full of teaching about how we as children of God are to relate to each other and to the world. We as the family of God are a different sort of family in all our relationships – in all we do we reflect our heavenly father.

What does all this mean for us as St Matthew's church? We've begun to talk about being God's family as part of exploring who we are and being intentional about what we are about as individuals and as church during the Lenten gatherings. We are children of God, part of his family because of what Christ has done for us to reconcile us to God as father. And that means that we have the role of being ambassadors of Christ. An ambassador is someone who can give you a visa to enter their country, give you entrée and they represent all that their country is to everyone else. We are to represent all that God's kingdom is to everyone else, and to give them a chance to enter by appealing to them to be reconciled to God, to come and be a child of God, through Christ. We are the family of God, a new

creation, and we are to invite and welcome all to be part of that family – it is the nature of our family relationship with Father God that as we are not separated from him any longer, we seek to remove anything that separates any other from God. God has entrusted this role to us as his family. It is not something that we can decide to ignore, leave to others, treat as an optional extra or sidestep like the older brother in Jesus' story. It is God's intention for the family of St Matthew's that we live as his kingdom family, his ambassadors, bringing the message of reconciliation to others outside of his family. How we intentionally be what God intends us to be, that sort of missional family, is something Francis and I hope to look at in our next Lenten meeting.

May we live as brothers and sisters in the family of father God, as those who have that ministry of reconciliation God has entrusted to us, to appeal to all to be come members of his family too.

I've chosen a simple song from ages back to help us pray about this. If you know it please sing but otherwise just follow it as your prayer now. Your Kingdom come, your will be done, now that we are your daughters and sons. May the prayer of our hearts daily be, God make us your family.