

2

He has reconciled us to God

Leader article

Quoting St Augustine of Hippo, Pope Francis said in an address:

I once heard a beautiful saying: ‘There is no saint without a past or a sinner without a future.’ This is what Jesus does. There is no saint without a past or a sinner without a future. It is enough to respond to the call with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of perfect people, but of disciples on a journey, who follow the Lord because they know they are sinners and in need of his pardon. Thus, Christian life is a school of humility which opens us to grace.

(General Audience, 13 April 2016)

Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel of Christ. God the Father gave us the gift of his Son to show us how much he loves us, and how far he would go, in order to bring us back to himself.

The teaching of Jesus and the prophets who went before him was that human sin must be taken seriously. It needs to be recognized, repented of and done away with once and for all. Put simply, sin is a failure to do what is right. When I was

He has reconciled us to God

first making my confession to a priest (the **Sacrament of Reconciliation** as we call it more often today), I was taught to confess sins against God, sins against others and then sins against myself. Sinful human beings fail in loving God and, more often than not, we involve other people in our lovelessness. And, inevitably, we do violence to ourselves, spoiling the goodness of God's gift of life to us and our capacity to reflect that love in our own lives. We have within us something powerful and ultimately destructive that draws us away from God and from living in harmony with him. It was this that Jesus Christ grappled with and defeated on the cross.

Jesus came not to explain sin but to forgive and redeem it. This is the meaning of his name: 'thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1.21, KJV). Throughout his ministry Jesus shows himself to be the friend of sinners (Matthew 9.9–13; Luke 15.1–2), and he offered forgiveness and freedom to those suffering from the consequences of sin (Mark 2.1–12; Luke 7.36–50). After the resurrection, the apostles are sent out to proclaim the forgiveness of sins through his name (Luke 24.47; John 20.23). The core of the Church's earliest preaching is that the cross, and the death of God's Son on it, is the high point of human rebellion against God as well as God's cure and the means of our restoration (Acts 2.23–24).

What men and women cannot do for themselves because they are so caught up in sin and their lives are tainted by it, God does for us in and through his Son. The Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world (as we say at the Eucharist). It is a work of sacrifice, writes the Apostle Peter: 'He himself

He has reconciled us to God

bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed' (1 Peter 2.24, RSV). But it is also a work of love: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3.16). To this we add St Paul's teaching: 'these last days' are, in fact, 'the fullness of time': 'when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons' (Galatians 4.4–5, RSV). The whole purpose of God taking on human flesh is about this dealing with sin, what we call reconciliation with God. St Irenaeus, an early Christian writer, summed it up in this way: 'He became what we are so that we might become what He is.'

Another way of speaking about reconciliation with God is to call it the work of atonement. However defined (and the debates are legion), atonement refers to the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made in order to reconcile humankind to God, the work Christ did in his life, passion and death to achieve our salvation. He gave his life 'as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45, RSV). Jesus offers himself on the cross, in a sense, as a substitute, enduring the death we should undergo because we turned our backs on God and rejected his love. Some find this concept unhelpful, being drawn more to the image of a loving Father, who calls us back and, through the example of Jesus on the cross, enables a wayward and sinful people to make the proper response of love. But in whatever way we view these historical interpretations of the atonement, the reconciliation Jesus accomplished on the cross is at the centre of Christian belief. St Paul wrote to the Colossians:

He has reconciled us to God

For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

(Colossians 1.19–22, RSV)

And this reconciliation of the cross is at the very heart of the Eucharist, where it is clear that, in celebrating the Eucharist (as we do in obedience to the Lord's command), there is an effective participation in the body and blood of Christ which he offered for us (1 Corinthians 10.16).

At the end of the parable of the Prodigal Son, we see a loving and compassionate father running between the repentant younger son and the dissatisfied and rather unattractive older one kicking his heels outside the door while the feasting goes on inside. The father is a reconciler, a bridge builder, one who sees the best in each of his sons despite their differences, endeavouring to get them together around the table, trying to rebuild the broken family, to restore human relationships, encouraging them to try their best and to be their best. That is the work of God, the work given to his Son – to reconcile, to restore, to build up and to bring harmony. It is the work of love which is at the heart of God who 'in Christ . . . was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19, RSV).

He has reconciled us to God

And at the feast offered to all (of which the Eucharist is an effective sign), the Lord Jesus Christ is a gentle, unassuming host who bears the character of a guest: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me’ (Revelation 3.20, RSV). He also has the bearing of a servant who washes the feet of those for whom he spreads the table (John 13). This reversal of roles is a characteristic of his teaching as well as his practice for, in speaking to those whose feet he washed earlier, Jesus says, ‘No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you’ (John 15.15, RSV).

One (relatively) modern hymn by Luke Connaughton (1917–79) says this:

1 Love is His word, love is His way, / feasting with all,
fasting alone,
living and dying, rising again, / love, only love, is His
way.

*Richer than gold is the love of my Lord:
better than splendour and wealth.*

2 Love is His way, love is His mark, / sharing His last
Passover feast.
Christ at the table, host to the twelve. / Love, only
love, is His mark.

He has reconciled us to God

- 3 Love is His mark, love is His sign, / bread for our strength, wine for our joy,
'This is my body, this is my blood,' / love, only love, is His sign.
- 4 Love is His sign, love is His news, / 'Do this,' He said, 'lest you forget all my deep sorrow, all my dear blood.' / Love, only love, is His news.
- 5 Love is His news, love is His name, / we are His own, chosen and called, family, brethren, cousins and kin. / Love, only love, is His name.
- 6 Love is His name, love is His law, / hear His command, all who are His, 'Love one another, I have loved you.' / Love, only love, is His law.
- 7 Love is His law, love is His word, / love of the Lord, Father, and Word, love of the Spirit, God ever one. / Love, only love, is His word.

By his work, we have become 'his own' – brothers and sisters, family, kin. Each has a place at table at the banquet Christ has prepared for us. And it is love that makes it so. Here at table where Christ dines with us, and we with him, he is the generous host, for he is Christ the victim and Christ the priest.

He has reconciled us to God

Questions

- 1 Can you think of an occasion when you've been lost physically? What did that feel like? Has there been a time in your life when you've felt lost spiritually? What did that feel like?**

It will be no surprise that St Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son is used in this module; it tells its own story and needs little amplification. Bishop John Moorman suggests that its appeal lies in the way that it shows us

the depth of God's love for his erring children and the assurance of forgiveness and rehabilitation for all those who, having sinned, have returned in penitence to the throne of grace. For, in that we have all sinned and wasted the gifts that God has given us we are all 'prodigal sons'; and we see in the fugitive of this story an image of ourselves, and of humanity, wayward and self-willed, yet constantly going back to our heavenly Father, knowing that we shall find a welcome and forgiveness.

(The Path to Glory, p. 186)

The entire fifteenth chapter of the Gospel is devoted to three 'lost and found' parables: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son. Sheep are often lost and so are coins. They can't find themselves. But with the son that is lost, there are two additional and equally important elements: the son coming to full realization of his predicament and what he must do to get back home, and the waiting father who, while waiting, believes that, in the end, this is what his son will do.

He has reconciled us to God

As part of the journey back to God, we need to understand that the panic and despair of being lost can come to an end. Like being lost physically, we are given hope when we stay still and listen carefully for a voice that may be calling to us. So many things attract us in life that are gaudy and false and beckon us down ways that offer passing satisfaction. Spiritually, we hunger for the fullness of life which only God can offer us since he is life in its fullness. Acknowledging that he was once lost, St Augustine prayed: 'Lord, you perfected my love so that I might surmount the dark entanglements of this world. Direct my desire toward the heavenly home, so that I may be enriched with every good thing.'

2 Can you think of a situation globally or nationally where someone admitting they were wrong and saying sorry has changed things? Does our attendance at the Eucharist make us more forgiving people?

Jesus said, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (John 8.31–32, RSV). We can be surprised by the power of forgiveness, and by the effect on other people as well as on ourselves. It is disarming to have the chance or opportunity to be given forgiveness, to discover someone out there is waiting to forgive us and will be open about it – no strings, no bargains, no deals. Very often, forgiveness starts with telling the truth about oneself.

One of the things I still remember from Sunday School is being taught that sin is 'I in the middle'. In other words, pride is our undoing and it always was. St Augustine wrote:

He has reconciled us to God

No other cause but pride could have been the beginning of our first parents' evil will. For pride is the beginning of all sin. What is pride but the desire of a height out of proportion to our state? Furthermore, it is a height out of proportion to our state to leave God – to whom the soul should cling as its basis – and to become and to be in some way our own basis.

(City of God XIV.xiii)

Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador had spoken out against social injustice and violence amid the escalating conflict between the military government and left-wing insurgents that led to civil war in his country. In 1980, Romero was shot by an assassin while celebrating Mass. Once known for being a conservative both in politics and theology, the wrongdoing and lack of compassion and concern for others that he saw around him led him to change his views and to change his life. In a way, self-preservation and personal comfort could not be at the centre of things. He said once, 'God is not satisfied with appearance. God wants the garment of justice. God wants his Christians dressed in love.'

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu played a leading role in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up in 1995, largely to reveal the truth about apartheid. Two things Archbishop Tutu himself said might provide the basis for some discussion of the pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation. 'Forgiveness says you are given another chance to make a new beginning.' He also said, 'If you want peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.'

He has reconciled us to God

On this last point, we might consider the example of Queen Elizabeth II who, on a visit to Northern Ireland in 2012, met and shook the hand of Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein (a former IRA commander) despite the murder by an IRA bomb of Lord Mountbatten, cousin to her and to Prince Philip.

3 Does coming to the Eucharist feel like coming home? If so, how?

In coming to the Eucharist we must be ready and we must be properly disposed to receive the sacrament of the Lord's body and blood, knowing that these gifts powerfully bring us to the foot of the cross and make us recall what the Lord Jesus Christ did there once and for all – that he has reconciled us to God. The destructive consequences of sin – alienation from God, from others and within ourselves – are done away with. So it is that the priest gives this invitation in the Book of Common Prayer to those preparing to receive Holy Communion:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God . . .

It is often said that we are most at home when we are gathered around the family table and sharing a meal. There is

He has reconciled us to God

something undoubtedly comfortable – indeed comforting – in that image. Jesus significantly spoke of the welcome of his Father’s house for those who believe in his name:

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

(John 14.1–3, RSV)

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