

Reconciliation Through Christ

Ed Masters

8th August 2010

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Micah 4:1-4

In October 2006 a man open fired in the classroom of a small Amish community school in Pennsylvania. After shooting ten girls, and killing five, the man committed suicide in the classroom. On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "We must not think evil of this man." Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God."

Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish in the area, explained: "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."

A spokesperson for the family of the killer said an Amish neighbour comforted them hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them. Amish community members visited and comforted the widow, parents, and parents-in-law. One Amish man held the killer's sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. The Amish have also set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. About 30 members of the Amish community attended man's funeral, his widow was one of the few outsiders invited to the funeral of one of the victims. The widow wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

How could the Amish community respond with such grace towards this killer and his family? How could they offer reconciliation so easily?

It is the response of a people who know who their God is, a people who are aware of what God has done for them, and are seeking to be faithful to him in the face of the most horrendous evil.

In order to be faithful to our God we need to know who He is. When we sing and pray to our God we do so in the knowledge of who God is and what He has done for us. Our God is the one who created the world. The one who refuses to abandon his world. It is the God we know ultimately through Jesus Christ, who was crucified and buried, and is raised to new

life. So here we are on a Sunday morning, gathered in the Spirit, with Christ present amongst us. But we gather to be re-centred on Christ, to be renewed in Him. So, let us remind ourselves of who God is. Let us be reminded of God's character and what His intentions are for His people!

And we do this by turning to Scripture, the place where God speaks to His people. Perhaps the best place to start is 2 Corinthians. I intend to walk through the passage, pausing to draw out certain points relating to our reconciliation with God. I will use the passage from Micah to demonstrate reconciliation is for us as individuals, for the community and for the entire world.

Paul is writing to a congregation that is in a fair bit of trouble... He is seeking to remind them of the centrality of Christ for their life together...

In 5:15 Paul reminds the Corinthians of what Jesus has done: *And he died for all, so that all who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*

The outcome of what Paul is saying is clear: we now live a different sort of life, and Paul spells out a bit more of what this means in the following passages. But what is the thing that makes it all possible? The hinge on which it all hangs is the death and resurrection of Jesus...

I want to take some time to explore why this is... Why is the crucifixion so central to our faith, and why the resurrection is so central to our life together..

If we place Jesus in the context of the whole Scriptures we see Him as part of an amazing story. It starts in the beginning. God created the world. And he created human beings in order to have relationship with them... And despite humans constantly abandoning him, God remains faithful to his intentions. The first part of the story is CREATION. So, when the time was right, God acted in the ultimate way to reconcile the world to Himself: He became man and lived amongst us. This is the SECOND part of the story – INCARNATION. And human beings responded by crucifying Him... Killing the God-Man. And when you think of the whole story it makes sense... this is the way that humans tended to act throughout the whole story.

Often it is easy to skip past the cross to the triumphant, resurrected Christ. I google imaged Jesus the other day and these are a few of the examples which came up. And whilst they may be great works of art.. I'm not sure, I do not think they take the cross seriously... And we do great damage if we do not take the cross seriously... Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes this of the cross: "the body of Jesus, especially as it is presented to us on the cross, makes visible to faith both the world's sinfulness and its being loved by God and the church community as the company of those who recognize their sin and gratefully submit to God."

In this quote, Bonhoeffer casts a heap of light onto why Paul mentions the cross. The cross is God's judgement on the world. We often shudder when we hear the language of judgement. No one wants anything to do with a God who judges and condemns. But we need to talk about judgement with reference to God Himself on the cross. On the cross

Jesus, God Himself, is crucified. It is God announcing his love for the world, His dramatic NO! to sin, which echoes through all the ages. And when we look at the resurrection which follows 3 days later we hear YES! to life. The Yes is God refusing to be dictated to by sin... So the judgement of God is a judgement on sin, not on the human. He remains the God who refuses to abandon His people, regardless of the cost!

And so we come to resurrection. The place where God ultimately announces His refusal to be dealt to by sin, and acts in order to make his intentions come to pass in the world. And so, the third part of the narrative... NEW CREATION

Just to summarise the events of the cross and resurrection, because Paul comes back to them when he is describing the shape of the new life.

On the cross Jesus revealed His love for us – he recognized us all as God’s children, and that nothing can change that

On the cross God judged the sin of the world – he revealed that we are indeed sinful, but that sin did not have the power to stop God having his way

By rising to new life Jesus overcame sin. No longer is it determinative. Humans can now live as they are meant to – in relationship with Christ.

Now onto verse 16 and following... Our lives according to Paul are changed by the Christ event. This death/resurrection thing isn’t some pie in the sky when you die sort of salvation. Instead it is something that changes the way we exist. It frees us from sin. Luther talked about sin as being curved in on oneself. .. We who have life from Christ, live no longer like that, we are opened up, and live for Christ... What does this mean for our everyday life though?

I think we can see three levels... And each level is summed up by the word reconciliation. the first is personal reconciliation with God, the second is reconciliation in the community, and the third is reconciliation between all peoples and creation

The first level is that of our reconciliation with God. God has acted to bring us back to him. Paul says this quite clearly throughout the letter. He writes in verse 17-18: Where Christ is there is new creation. And through Christ God has reconciled us to himself. Note how God does the work, it isn’t me reconciling God to myself, but God reconciling me to Him.

This reconciliation to God can only take place in a community. It is not simply a personal, private thing. For our God did not make us to be self contained persons, but instead created us for relationship with Him and one another. And nor does He save individuals in isolation from others. Instead, being saved means to be remade for relationship with God and with one another. Therefore, the second level of reconciliation involves a new way of being a community. No longer is it acceptable to judge the way we used to, but instead our judgements are based on what Christ has done. Look again at the cross to see what Jesus has done, for this is how reconciliation happens in community – Just as Jesus recognizes us

as God's children we recognize each other as a child of God. Just as Jesus announced No to sin, we rebuke sin. And just as Jesus was raised from the dead we recognize the new life that God brought about through Christ. And note... just as Christ stands at the centre of our new personal lives, so He stands at the centre of our communal life!

This community does not exist for its own sake. Just as the individual does not exist as a self-contained unit, so the community exists for God. And God has shown through the cross that He exists for us, for humanity, so the community exists for the sake of the whole world. *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; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

Christ's death on the cross wasn't simply for my soul. Nor was it just so we could have an awesome community life. It was for far more! It was to see God's intentions fulfilled in the world. Look at the promises we see in Micah... God promises that He will be the centre. People from all over the world will come to Him and seek his way. He will arbitrate between nations, so there is not war. And nations will be reconciled! And us, we take part in this... Paul says that we are given this ministry of reconciliation. So as Christ's ambassadors we have a key role to play in this ministry of reconciliation. We do not have to achieve peace ourselves, nor do we have to solve any of the world's problems on our own steam, because Jesus has already done that! What then do we do? We follow Jesus Christ. We point to the amazing story of Christ. We proclaim the crucified and risen Christ!

Let me finish by reflecting on the story from John's Gospel. Jesus comes amongst the disciples who are hiding away in a locked room. And he says "Peace be with you". And then he shows them his hands which have been pierced. He shows them the wound in his side. And he says "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" And he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit". The peace which Jesus offers comes about through His suffering on the cross, and our ministry with Him is sustained by the Spirit of God. So I say to you today, Peace! Receive the Spirit of God, the Spirit of our crucified Lord, the God of peace!