

Joseph the Reconciler...

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Genesis 45¹⁻¹⁴, 2 Cor 5¹⁶⁻²¹ / John 17²⁰⁻²⁴

Reconciliation is one of the most important words in the Bible. If we were to try to sum up the whole ministry of Christ in one word this would probably be it. Most of us probably have some idea of what it means... the bringing together of two things or people or ideas which were once separated. So when Don Brash and Hone Harawira begin to complement each other publicly we might say they are 'reconciled' and when Green Peace blesses further oil exploration off the New Zealand coast we might say they are 'reconciled.' In the same way Jesus' great work is one of **reconciliation** in that He reconciles us to God.

¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor 5)

Christ brings us back together with God in the pioneering act of reconciliation. This is the central work of Jesus and there are a number of things we should note about this work. The first is that Paul is at pains to help his Greek readers understand the dynamics of this great act and he is so because the Greeks were used to the idea of needing to be reconciled to God. Their great pantheon of God's were always needing to be pacified, appeased and placated. And the methods used to achieve this were also well known. Sacrifice, the offering of a ransom or a scapegoat were the accepted means of getting one's god to do what one wanted. IN other words we had to work hard to gain the favour of god. This, however, was miles away from the concept of reconciliation that Paul wanted to highlight.

For Paul the act of reconciliation was beyond us. It was not something we could work for and could only be achieved by God. We could not work to overcome our alienation from God. Only God could achieve what was required – **only the one offended and injured could achieve what was required.** So God is not the object of reconciliation but its subject – He is the One doing the reconciling work rather than us. Our task is simply to choose to be included in that work though as we shall soon see that is still not easy.

A further unique aspect of reconciliation as we find it in Christ is that it represents an **exchange**. So not only is guilt cancelled but it is replaced by something else and that something is a wholeness which is Christ's. The picture is that Christ has exchanged His wholeness and His wonderful whole relationship with God for our sinful and compromised existence. He takes on our brokenness and gives us His wholeness. He receives our damaged and imperfect life for His faultless and unspoiled life. This is the work of reconciliation. This is what we have in Jesus – such a precious gift.

It's interesting to note that this dynamic is mostly worked out in the New Testament. It is not directly obvious in the Old if those it is there in the lives of many of its heroes and Joseph is one. In his life we can see in stark relief a wonderful picture of reconciliation.

Joseph stands in the place of God. In the face of all his apparent insensitivity and possible arrogance, though this is largely inferred rather than proven, Joseph is dealt a number of alienating and wounding blows by his own family. The greatest of these is, of course, being sold into slavery in Egypt. In this one act the brothers effectively murder him because he is not likely to be ever seen by them again and they certainly do not intend to go back and rescue them. Relationship is not only severed here it is done with what is called a 'red hand.' When we do something 'red handed' we do it deliberately and with obvious intent. The saying originates in Scotland and comes simply from the notion that if one murdered someone then one would likely have blood on one's hands – hence, 'red handed.'

The brothers seal their rejection of Joseph by this act. They separate themselves from Joseph, emotionally, spiritually and finally, of course, geographically. And we

see this progression in the story. We know that the emotional separation begins first because we see the story of the way his brothers took offense at him and we know that at this time there is no indication that they are worshipping different or other gods. The spiritual separation comes with the decision not only to kill Joseph but to lie to their father about his death. In doing both of these things they cut themselves off from God – they break God’s law and they misrepresent themselves to God’s representative who is their father Jacob. Finally the geographical separation follows. This leaves us with an important lesson.

The emotional world is a gateway for the spiritual. If we don’t deal with our emotions and have this inner world of ours in order we will find that our spiritual sense degrades very quickly. Many people have lost faith because they’ve allowed their emotions to reign unchecked over themselves and they’ve allowed their emotions to rule both their relationships and their demeanour. The emotional world is one that requires taming and training and we ignore this at our peril. Please don’t get me wrong here. I’m not advocating becoming emotionless and I’m not saying that emotions are wrong. They are, however, an untamed horse that requires taming and we refuse to do this at our peril spiritually and in every other way.

The story of their reconciliation with Joseph is instructive. Notice first of all that it is Joseph into whose hands falls the possibility of reconciliation. He, the offended against party, is the one who is able to either head for reconciliation or not. They who are the offending party cannot do it because they do not know who he is. Notice however the position they are in. Since their great offense look at what has happened to their life. Nothing has prospered. Nothing has gone right. Despite their great skill in farming the weather has been against them to the point where they’ve had to go down to Egypt to pick up supplies. All their skill has not even left them with enough to eat.

Joseph does, however, choose to forgive and though he takes some time over it and though he waits to see if they’ve meted out the same treatment to his younger brother Benjamin he does give them plenty which is a sign of his desire to reconcile. But there is more. The final scene in which Joseph eventually reveals who he is speaks to both the power and the nature of reconciliation. In it we

notice again that Joseph is one in whose hands entirely is the whole act of reconciliation. He has the power at this moment in time to do one of two things – to take utter an complete revenge on his brothers and to have them all killed immediately or... to be reconciled to them by virtue of his own choice and action. All this is a complete reflection of the nature of reconciliation wrought by Jesus Christ for us. In the garden when confronted with a group of armed guards who had come to illegally arrest Him Jesus rebukes Peter for stepping in with a sword for, He says,

⁵²Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?”(Matt 26)

You see Jesus did have the choice to take revenge and to work it out this way. But He choose another way – the way of Grace; the way of Reconciliation.

Notice also that the brothers hadn’t done a thing towards reconciliation. They hadn’t lifted a finger to find Joseph and, in fact, in answer to the question about his fate had said this...

¹³They said, “We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more.” (Gen 42)

Now the words ‘is no more’ can be taken a number of ways but what seems clear is that they were not willing at this stage to own up to what they’d done. So they bring nothing to the table. It is the same with us. Empty handed we come to the table of Christ. We bring nothing of worth to this table – nothing that can benefit the process of reconciliation. That we are there is enough for God. He and He alone must do the rest of the work.

Finally we note a third aspect of the reconciling work and it is this – we are reconciled to be reconcilers. Joseph sent the brothers back to his father to fetch

him to Egypt where he would live in plenty for the rest of his life as would they. And there they would begin a journey of reconciliation that would put a new nation on course for the great plan of God to give them a land of their own when God's Name could be raised up for the whole world. And they, the brothers of Joseph who had treated him so cruelly and with such 'red-handedness' would, themselves, become agents of reconciliation.

We are not saved for nothing. We are not reconciled by Christ with God for nothing. We are reconciled so that we might become agents of God's reconciliation in the world. Paul says in that reading we read from 2 Corinthians today these words...

¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5)

How are we to be ambassadors for Christ? It is by become agents of that very same reconciliation of which we have all become benefactors. It is by being reconciled with each other and with the world. We cannot sit back and expect others to do this work. Like Christ and like Joseph – even though they were the wounded parties we must understand that it is our duty to enter into the reconciling work – to be reconciled. This is what we were made for. This is largely what the Christian community should be demonstrating all the time – how reconciled we can be with each other. And since this is the fundamental work of the Church one thing we should know is this – reconciliation is some of the hardest work we will ever do. Reconciliation, you see, is not about justification or being fair or having our say or even about getting things right. Reconciliation is about restoring relationship and to do this we will often have to give up all our rights just as Christ gave up all His to reconcile us to God.

Story of AM and my journey with God.