

## A Ministry of Reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

I read recently that the Corinthians were a ‘factionalised and contentious community’ or in other words, they were argumentative, prickly, touchy, very unsettled and not at peace with one another!

So Paul offers this “reconciliation”.

Surprisingly it’s not a word that appears very often in the New Testament and only in a couple of passages in Paul’s letters.

It’s a word that does **not** have its roots in religion, but rather **it is** rooted in politics as it refers to a dispute resolution.

You may sometimes hear of a diplomatic reconciliation of warring nations, or perhaps on a more personal approach, the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife.

When Paul uses this verb “reconcile” with God as the subject, the word takes on a whole new meaning as Paul speaks about overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships.

This is clearly demonstrated in Romans 5 as Paul uses this reconciliation terminology...”while we were enemies, we were *reconciled* to God through the death of his son”.

God has taken the initiative to overcome **our** hostility and alienation from him and to restore us to peaceful relationship with himself.

God has taken the initiative, He has taken the first step, and what a step!

To quote John 3:16 perhaps one of the most well-known verse in the bible, ‘for God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son’.

Reconciliation though, is a two way street, it involves both parties and so the people of Corinth have to be willing to change and it’s the same today in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The people of Corinth needed to and the people of today need to ‘see things through God’s eyes and not through their own’.

In order to do this there had to be and there needs to be a new creation in them and in us, not just some make over where the old self is still there beneath this false exterior, but a true change from deep within.

That’s why Jesus said ‘you must be born again’, just like a human being is made new in the mother’s womb, so we must be made new again.

Paul did not write “if anyone is in Christ there may be a few changes”, rather he states quite clearly “if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!”

There is nothing left of the old self.

When individuals change so the world around them starts to change.

It echoes something of that statement, ‘together we can change the world’.

There’s a hint of that world change and the transforming power of God in Paul’s words as he states ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them’.

In essence Paul is saying, the whole world is being made new by the cross and resurrection and that all our relationships have to be re-evaluated in light of that transformation.

The basis of Pauls comment is rooted in Isaiah when God says “for I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall **not** be remembered or come to mind”

Let’s forget about the past and look to the future.

So that's it then, we can accept this message, we can be willing to be a new creation and then sit back and let God get on with it?

Or can we?  
If only it were that simple!

There is more to do as is stated in the later part of verse 18 as it says; 'and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.'

So important is this task, this ministry of reconciliation, that Paul repeats it in verse 19 just in case we didn't hear him the first time...'And **he** has committed to us the message of reconciliation'.

It's quite a mind blowing task, to be as Paul says 'Christ's ambassadors'.

If you look up the word ambassador in the dictionary it will tell you an ambassador is a 'diplomat sent by a state as its **permanent** representative in a foreign country'

And if you look up diplomat you are told that it is 'an **official** representing a country abroad'.

So as Christ's ambassadors, we have a **permanent** and **official** position as His **representatives**.

That's ok because it also says in a foreign country or abroad, so that gets us off the hook?!

But that foreign country is closer than we think, it's a land we step into every day; it's a country that can feel sometimes that it's growing in size!

So how can we take on this honourable task, this great duty?

I'm mindful of the response used at a baptism, when questions are asked, the response is 'with the help of God we will'.

He won't leave us on our own to be His ambassadors, He will give us the strength and resources when we ask, He will use us as channel for His work, or as Paul puts it, 'as though God were making His appeal through us'.

We don't just announce this reconciliation, we embody it.

It's not unlike part of my job.

The garage that I own is also an MOT testing station. The objectives and aims of the MOT scheme are not of my choosing, but are laid down by another body.

I am therefore a representative of that body with an official position, part of which is to explain to folk, so they may have an understanding of the requirements of the MOT scheme.

It's important for me that people see me in this role, so that they feel they can ask a question and I will try and answer it.

And I think leads to a question that we need to ask ourselves a question.

How do people see us when they come into our churches?

Do they see us as a gathering of folk who think themselves better than others?

When visitors come through our doors do they see a group of reconciled people, looking to bring others into that same reconciliation?

Do they feel loved, worthy and accepted, or do they feel unworthy, unclean and irreconcilable? You know, Jesus loved sinners, He had sinners all around him and He never condemned them, and yet there are people out there who feel 'put off' by church, odd really because as one interpretation puts it: 'church is a gathering of people who seek to imitate the Jesus that sinners loved'.

When Jesus was speaking to the woman caught in adultery, he **did not** condemn her, he **did not** say, 'you're not worthy, you're not clean, you're not loved, rather he told her 'go and do not sin anymore'.

At that moment she had been reconciled to God through the words of God's own son.

Paul makes it quite clear in verse 21 as he says 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'

Paul is not saying 'so that we might know about the righteousness of God' nor is he saying 'that we might believe in the righteousness of God' not even 'that we proclaim the righteousness of God' or that we may be 'justified by the righteousness of God' but what he is saying is that 'we might become the righteousness of God'.

God wants us to embody or represent the righteousness of himself in the world we live in and He wants it in such a way that reconciliation is clearly visible and available to all.

But true reconciliation can only be made visible if we talk the talk and walk the walk, as Jesus did, if we are willing and able to show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness and a self-giving grace.

But that's not all.

The reading we have heard today overlaps into chapter 6, and it has to in order to make any sense. The chapter divisions in our English versions are for want of a better term 'artificial', put there by scribes well after the original writings.

It makes you wonder if these scribes or translators had a full understanding of the message within the text?

So Paul goes on to say 'we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.

For he says,'

Who says, well Isaiah says, because that's who Paul is quoting in verse 2.

'In this time of my favour I heard you and in the day of salvation I helped you'.

And then Paul adds a very important tag line.

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.

This promise of reconciliation is not just some distant vision of life after death or some hope in a distant disembodied future.

It's for the here and now, it's something we are caught up in as ambassadors for God.

Reconciliation now shows that here is hope in the midst of present suffering that God's reconciling power will overcome and will prevail.

That's easy enough for me to stand here and say, but in the wake of what has happened in Tunisia and other such atrocities, it's hard to believe.

People have tried to rule by fear and it always fails.

I don't think there was any unity, love, mercy, forgiveness and self-giving grace from the gunman that day in Tunisia.

There may be darkness in this world, but light of Christ will overcome it.

Just as Paul wanted so much for the people of Corinth to be reconciled and changed to lead a better life, so it is our duty to show that a New Creation, a rebirth, a complete change, can bring about a new beginning, a new hope and salvation.

And as Paul tells us, 'now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation'.

Let's pray

Heavenly Father, we thank you that your love for your world is so great that you sent your one and only son to die for us and for our sins, so that we may be reconciled to you.

Give us all that we need to be your ambassadors, as you make your appeal through us.

So that we may carry out this Ministry of Reconciliation and bring people closer to you and your Kingdom.

Amen

Every Blessing

Peter Igo