

Our church is not a cult. We do not tell people what to give. All we can do is to ask people to review their giving to the church in the light of God's love – and then to give extravagantly!

Ambassadors of Reconciliation

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'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor 5.19)

We are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation

You may know the story of the three men who met in prison. They worshipped together each Sunday. The first man left prison and felt called to be a Methodist minister and in time was elected the President of the Methodist Conference of his country. The second man left and he felt called to be an Anglican priest and in 1994 he was elected Anglican Archbishop of his country. The third man stayed in prison nearly 27 years and, when he was released, he was in time elected president of his country. The prison, of course, was Robben Island, the country South Africa where I was born, and the man who celebrates his 92nd birthday this year is Nelson Mandela.

The theme that has united these three men in their own lives was and is *reconciliation*. If there is one task surely that is the challenge for our time, that is at the heart of the good news about Jesus Christ, it is the one discovered by those three men in prison and in their lives since: reconciliation. And it is the task at the heart of being a pastor.

Our Gospel reading (John 21) describes the risen Christ giving Peter breakfast by the Sea of Galilee. One detail in this story is crucial. We are told Jesus cooked the breakfast on a **charcoal fire**. When Peter, before the crucifixion, betrays Jesus three times in the High priest's courtyard and denies ever having known him,

we are told that Peter was warming his hands on a **charcoal fire**. Peter was a fisherman and whenever he came in from fishing to have a meal he would see and smell the charcoal fire on which his meal was being cooked. It would forever have reminded him of his betrayals of his Lord. So it was so poignant that now, again by a charcoal fire, Jesus re-commissions him three times. Now the sight and smell of a charcoal fire would remind him of how far he had come. Through Jesus there would always, always be a fresh start.

It is our task as pastors both to proclaim this faith and to be ambassadors of reconciliation. Of course we are tempted in our lives by the ethics of the playground, to get our own back, to win whatever the cost. Yet we know in our heads that, in a world where the ethic is an eye for an eye, only the blind become rulers.

We know the strength of our personal feelings. It was the last quick question on Radio 4's *Any questions*, and the panel were asked if they had ever thought of divorcing their partners. The first panellist replied: "Divorce never, murder often".

In parish ministry, we used to prepare people for marriage in groups of about five couples. In week two, after we have asked them how they handle conflict, the next question is how easy do they find it to say sorry? It is the crucial question: Can we both ask for and receive forgiveness-reconciliation?

But forgiveness and a fresh start so often have to be worked out in situations way beyond the personal. I always remember the words of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and who brought first century Christianity to 18th century England. "The world is my parish", he often repeated. Our danger so often is to treat the parish as our world.

For years we all thought South Africa would end up in a blood bath, but as Archbishop Desmond Tutu has described so powerfully in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, it needed more than just individuals to release the forces for reconciliation and the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa" played a major part in this. For two years, they heard stories of people's dreadful experiences, more than 20,000 testimonies, and where possible they exercised a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Just think of the countries and situations where this is needed now. But at some point in every situation, in every conflict, there comes the moment when there is an opportunity for reconciliation, and if we do not take it, we are drawn into an ever deeper spiral of anger and bitterness.

But where does the impulse for reconciliation come from? Where did those three men in prison find the resources for their life's work? And here I believe we are touching on the heart of the matter, what life is about, what our ministry is about.

Desmond Tutu describes it like this: "There is a movement, not easily discernible, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony. God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving towards the centre, towards unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice; one that removes barriers."

Jesus says: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw everyone to myself", and he hangs from his cross with out-flung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything, in a cosmic embrace, so that everyone belongs... all belong to one family, God's family, the human family. For as Paul says: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free". We are all one in Christ.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian story, the Christian experience of God. Nothing and no one can finally overcome God's capacity to reconcile people to people, races to races, the world to himself. This begins in our own hearts, but it has implications for our world.

I grew up in a home where my father was the parish priest. Much as I admired him, the one thing I knew I could never be was a priest. Far too exposing. But when I was 15 we spent Holy Week at school. The preacher for the week had just returned from South Africa. His book, *Naught for your comfort*, was already a best seller. I realised by the end of that week that I could not escape ordination. Father Trevor Huddleston, as he was then, gave us a vision, that the heart of the Christian faith was about changing the world to reflect God's love, God's forgiveness, and God's justice. The Mass, the Eucharist, the Holy communion, the Lord's Supper was at the heart of this revolution, the transformation and the

sharing of the bread and wine, a glimpse of God at work in creation and in the world. Ten years later, Trevor, by now Bishop of Stepney, ordained me to my first job as a curate in Poplar, East London.

But it comes back to the experience and commitment of those three men who met in prison, and how their lives have echoed to the task of reconciliation; they have been ambassadors of reconciliation. Our task, our calling as priests and people in however modest a way is to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

For many years a friend, Rabbi Guy Hall, has come to preach at one of our team churches. Expounding the Hebrew Scriptures to us, reflecting on the Gospel for the day from his tradition, and telling a Jewish joke. One year he ended his sermon with these words: “Always remember that at the heart of my religion is duty, at the heart of Islam is submission, at the heart of your religion is love. We Jews have always been rather good at looking after ourselves after all we have had to be.

It is you Christians who feel called to care for the whole world. That is because of Jesus of Nazareth. Never forget your calling or your Lord.”

Revealing God’s Glory and Cross Cultural Mission

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God’s glory. What is God’s glory on earth? Is it not his presence and grace made known in the World through his people? For me that is the presence and grace of God’s people in the World. Isa 43.7 says that we are created for God’s glory. The glory of God is the beauty of His Spirit, the beauty of his character as revealed by Christ’s presence and grace among us. God’s glory can be seen in us through his presence, love, faith, music, character and love for nature. The world around us reveals God’s glory. The psalmist wrote, “The heavens tell about the glory of God. The skies show that his hands created them. Day after day they speak about it.