

Why did Jesus die?
The BIG Questions Series
April 15, 2018

Part two: The Ministry of Reconciliation.

2nd Corinthians 5:16-21

16 And so, from now on, we don't look on anyone in terms of mere human judgement. Even if we did once regard Christ in these terms, that is not how we know Christ now. 17 And, for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old order has passed away; now everything is new!

18 All of this is from God who ransomed us through Christ - and made us ministers of that reconciliation.19 This means that through Christ the world was fully reconciled again to God, who didn't hold our transgressions against us but instead entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation.

20 this makes us Christ's ambassadors, God is making the appeal directly through us: Therefore we implore you: In Christ's name be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake God made the One who was without sin to be sin, so that by this means we might become the very holiness of God.

Mark 10: 42-45

42 Jesus called them together and said: You know how among the Gentiles those who exercise authority are domineering and arrogant; those "great ones" know how to make their own importance felt. 43 But it can't be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest 44 whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. 45 The Promised One has come not to be served, but to serve- to give one life in ransom for the many.

The inclusive Bible (FET) translation

Friends in Christ,

Do you remember the picture of the dead little Syrian boy who was washed up on the shore of a Turkish beach? I am sure you do. 2Year old Alan Kurdi drowned like thousands of other refugees have, trying to cross the Mediteranean to safety.

Yet this one picture changed the hearts of millions: It lead to an unprecedented public demand for sponsoring refugees – 3 years ago. Re-homing these displaced children and adults has cost much energy, bought also brought the sponsors incredible joy and satisfaction.

Have we not seen little Alan Kurdi in a sense “redeemed” as we watch little Mustafa Haggar play soccer in Annapolis Royal? Have we not seen Alan Kurdis parents in the Syrian parents who sell middle eastern food at our farmers market?

One picture can become a symbol of both intense suffering and redemption. This is also the mystery in the cross of Christ.

Last Sunday we began our look at what might have been accomplished in Jesus death.

We began with a look at what Christian tradition has said about this. It is undisputable that the New Testament witnesses say Jesus died “for our sins” and “for our sake” in some form. What “for our sake” means though is difficult and not every Christian has understood this in the same way in the history of the church.

I sketched out a few different answers and described Anselm of Canterbury's 11th century “atonement” theory that has become the most widely known: God is a righteous and just God and demands punishment for sin. We can not pay the price for our sins, so our lives are lost. Only the perfect victim is good enough to cover our sins, so God sends his Son to be sacrificed in our place and for our sakes. Only Christ's blood is sufficient to save us from eternal damnation.

Many of us have enormous difficulty with this interpretation of why Jesus died on the cross-because it seems to make God an abusive deity, demanding

blood and punishment for sin and taking it out on his beloved Son (or on himself, depending on how you see the relation of God and Jesus on the cross).

We question how the execution of a good person could be good news for anyone, let alone be good for those who are being abused by the powers that be in today's world.

We also question why God could not find another way to forgive us.

If some extraordinary people, like the Amish parents of the children who were murdered in cold blood in a little one room school house in Pennsylvania a few years ago...were able in their hearts to forgive someone who has hurt them so deeply – surely God could not be less capable of bloodless forgiveness than human beings can be?!

The idea of blood sacrifice as atonement for sin is rooted in Old Testament religion and culture and thus reflected in the New Testament writings – but is this really all there is to say about Christ's death?

I answer with a vehement “No”. Blood sacrifices belong to the past. Even if Christians today want to say with some voices in the early church that Christ was the last blood sacrifice ever, I do not find this language worthy of being repeated today. Its got to go.

Still – there is the fundamental affirmation of the New Testament that “Christ died for our sins” and that something enormous was accomplished in his death and resurrection.

If not as a blood sacrifice how do we then understand this today?
What must we still hold on to?

First: We affirm that it is true that humans alone can never fix all the wrong they have done, no matter how much we might be sorry for our actions. You don't need to be a mass murderer to realize this. One incident of hurtful messages spread by gossip, or a car accident in which innocents die and the driver lives, or the destruction of the environment brought on by our innocent looking habits - all this shows that we can never fix all the damage we have caused. So, in order to be reconciled with those we have hurt, we do depend

on a certain measure of mercy and grace. The New Testament says over and over that out of grace we are loved and saved, not by anything we could accomplish.

Secondly, we affirm that when a wrong has been done it is important that justice be done. But how? The person who offended should really bear the pain of what they have done we say. In the Old Testament and similar cultures that looks like this: You take an eye, you loose an eye. You destroy a tooth you loose your own tooth. Punitive justice we call that. Justice through punishment of the offender. You steal a car, you loose your freedom, you go to jail. This is the punitive justice system, then and now. Sadly, this is also where our current justice systems often go wrong. Nothing really helpful is achieved by simply punishing someone for what they did. That punishment does often nothing for their remorse or their reformation in character. What would be so much better is getting the offender to restore what was lost, provoke true repentance for the deed, if possible, receive forgiveness and end with reconciliation and a heartfelt “never again”.

But reconciliation can happen only when punishment is paired with opportunities for the offender to really understand what they have done, and when the offender is given ways to repair the damage. The New Testament speaks much more often about the death of Jesus in terms of reconciliation, rarely as punishment for our sins. Where the New Testament idea of “ransom paid” or “sin offering appears, (as it does in our scripture reading this morning) it is connected with the notion of RECONCILIATION.

Reconciliation is the key to the cross, not punishment.

Thirdly, we must affirm that the New Testament never speaks of God father hatching out a plan to give up his son for us.

Jesus freely, freely (!), gives his life into the hands of the powerful of his day. You can only have a truly loving act when there is freedom attached to that act. Jesus did not have to do anything. He was God in human form, the New Testament says. As a human being he acted in freedom. As he goes to the execution it is done in loving continuity with his previous nonviolent ministry of inviting the outsiders, everyone, in to the kingdom of God.

John's gospel stresses that what happens on the cross is done because of the friendship of God with humankind shown in Jesus' love for his people: “No

one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends”.

Fourthly: We affirm that the work of reconciliation which God undertakes in the Promised One, the Messiah(=in the Christ) begins with Jesus' whole ministry- his baptism, preaching, healing, eating with outcasts and well established people all together. Reconciliation begins with his coming into the world, birth in a hut, among animals and shepherds.

Reconciliation continues with him teaching people to look at the log in their own eye before they criticize the splinter in someone else' s eye.

Reconciliation continues with the Promised One healing the lame and lifting up those who are silenced. Reconciliation shows in his humble attitude and servant ministry. Reconciliation continues as the Promised One elevates love to the highest principle in the practice of religion. In him, the Promised One, the Messiah, the Christ, God reconciled himself to us. Words of the apostle Paul. We, who continue to offend one another and God with our sin, are being reconciled with God because God lives our life on earth in Christ, and shares our weakness and frustrations, fears. God comes to us where we live. Then, God shows a new way. Then, God experiences in Christ, how human sin can do the worst to human life- snuff it out it in a cynical and cruel way. God-self experiences in the body how the powerful brutally torture and execute anyone who threatens them. God-self in the Promised One could have weaselled out of this, the NT states often, but God freely chose to bear the consequences of human sin. This happens in solidarity with countless innocent victims of violence who bore and are still bearing the consequences of sin.

So, may I spell out what I see as the work of God in the Christ:

The first aspect of the reconciliation work is God's love for humankind as shown in Jesus, as he enacts the way of reconciliation in the “ Kingdom -of God” - ministry.

In Jesus reconciles humans with one another (think of the community meals and the eucharistic table!!) and reconciles humans with God: think of the ones who were previously excluded from feeling God's love; the “outcasts” and “sinners”.

The second aspect of the reconciliation work is that God in Christ bears our life and the painful consequences of human sin. And freely so. Forever we will know that God is with us, at our side, especially in the brutal consequences of human sin.

The third aspect is the resurrection: In it we have the promise that even when humans have done their worst, the infinite creative power of God will still bring healing and wholeness. It is the promise that, (in the words of Desmond Tutu:)

goodness is stronger than evil,
love is stronger than hate,
light is stronger than darkness,
life is stronger than death.

How might this help us today? Reconciliation is more needed than ever.

Our cultures on this planet are more divided than ever, North and South, Western and Arab world, The appallingly rich and appallingly poor, the left and the right, the nationalists and the internationalists, those who don't mind to be governed by greed and fear and those who want to be governed by generosity and courage...we all seem to talk less and less with one another. Bridges are falling down, people and peoples are retreating into their respective corners.

What then is our role in the world as Christians?

20 Therefore we are ambassadors of Christ; in effect, God is making his appeal through us. What we do is appeal on behalf of Christ: "Be reconciled to God!"

So what Paul states here is that Christ came to us, effecting reconciliation with God. And more, that now, we, who know him as the Risen Lord are given the role of ambassadors for Christ.

An interesting and intriguing concept:

What does an ambassador do?

I grew up in Germany's capital city – littered with embassies, and in Canada I lived close to Ottawa for over a decade. Ambassadors are real people. I've known a couple.

They represent their own country in a foreign country. They have to be people of tact and knowledge.

They need to represent the values and culture of their country in a way that it is true, yet does not offend the values and culture of the country they are guests in.

Why does Paul choose that image? It is very fitting: The values and cultures of this world are not the believers true home. Jews and Christians state that they are “aliens” and “foreigners” on earth- and “citizens” of God's realm, heaven. We Christians are ambassadors in 21st century Canada or wherever we find ourselves, ambassadors for our own “country: which is the “reign of God” or the “kingdom of God”, or the “kingdom of heaven” however you call it. Our “country” which we represent as ambassadors in a strange culture is the “country” that Jesus enacted when he was among us proclaiming and creating the “country” kingdom of God.

We are to represent our country's values of compassion, hospitality, truth telling, kindness and beauty which includes wrinkles and simple living in a foreign “country “– where values of consumerism reign and “might is right” reign, and egoism reigns, and beauty is sought in flawlessness, luxury and eternal youth.

Like Jesus, as ambassadors we are called to reconcile estranged people, stand up against empire for the oppressed people and animals and lands, heal the sick, encourage the broken hearted, help the weak, celebrate life in its simple goodness.

We plead” Be reconciled” with one another, and with God.

We strive to live in a way that makes reconciliation to happen.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, significant co- creator of the Truth and Rte conciliation process in South Africa- again:

"Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing."

An ambassador might be a mediator sometimes , this is how Tich Nhat Hanh, the contemporary Buddhist sage understands the role of the person who acts for reconciliation:

"Reconciliation is to understand both sides; to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then go to the other side and describe the suffering being endured by the first side."

An ambassador must seek the truth and be humble. Must be tactful. A mediator must be willing to tone down the demands of her ego for the greater good of all.

I would love to talk here at length about the Truth and Reconciliation process in our own country. However, that will have to wait until I will see you again in May.

How we can be ambassadors for Christ without offending, that is our second-last question in this preaching series. I will speak about this when I come back from vacation, in May.

For now, I invite you to practice living in your new vocation as ambassadors. You all have been promoted to a diplomatic career. It will not pay as well as in Ottawa, but your pay is in a different currency anyway.

Elisabeth

May 13: "How do we spread the God News, without offending?"

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