

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

(2 Cor 5:17-21)

When we read in Genesis that God said “Let us make man in our image”, 2 important things are revealed.

First, that God was not alone. The language is in the plural - that is, He had companionship. But this companionship was not like a friendship where people have things in common. It was a companionship that exceeds all understanding of any other known intimacy of relationship, a companionship of joy and delight whose nucleus is love. The Apostle John understood something of this (Jn 1:1-3) and of course Jesus reveals it when He speaks of being in the Father and the Father in Him, and having been in such a relationship since before creation (Jn 17:21 etc).

Secondly, we are made to be like this. We have an innate capacity to relate lovingly in companionship. This is what we are designed for. At the very core of our existence and the primary significance of being made in the image of God is relational fulfillment and our real sense of purpose and fulfillment in life will come with our relationship connections. If these are askew or non-existent or fractious, we will be living outside the main purpose of God for our lives. On the other hand if our journey in life is dedicated to strengthening and healing our relationships we will be living in harmony with the image of God and we will know a sense of purpose and belonging that would otherwise be missing.

Few would doubt that what most people seek more than anything else in life is to be loved and to love, - yearnings that come from a capacity for tenderness. Yearnings that come from the image of God within us.

Many years ago as a very young lawyer I was advising a young man who was soon to be sentenced to prison. Although only about 20, he was a repeat offender, and he looked like one! With him was his girlfriend. She looked an appropriate companion for him. They were a tough looking couple. As the reality of his situation was dawning, he was becoming quite upset. She put her arms around him and kissing him on the cheek said “*Don't worry darling, I won't let them take you away*”. It was a futile thing for her to say because there was nothing she could do to stop what was going to happen, but in that moment she expressed a yearning to love and be loved which was beautiful and tender and portrayed to me the image of God from a most unlikely source.

The God portrayed in the Hebrew scriptures was very different from any other Supreme being worshipped at the time. Others were austere, fearsome and remote, needing appeasement, self contained, unapproachable and independent. Think of Jupiter (Roman) and Zeus (Greek). “Relational, loving and tender” are not words that would spring to mind. In contrast, the Hebrew God (Yahweh), while of course supreme, is portrayed as so rich in self giving love that His community wished to share their tender unity and companionship of delight so as not possess these attributes to themselves alone. We have been created to be included in and become part of the family of this loving Almighty God.

Let's look at some features of God's love.

John makes the astounding statement that God is love (1Jn 4:8 & 16) and in so saying is personifying the nature of love. Love is an essence of God's character. So acts of love are distinct from the source of love. Lush growth that is irrigated by a stream winding through some landscape is proof of a spring somewhere, of a source of water, but it is not the source itself. There can be no acts of love without a source. God is the source. God is love

God's love is sacrificial. Paul explains this when he describes how Christ *humbled Himself and became obedient to even death on a cross* (Phil 2:8) and he also explains how this should work in our own lives because we should humbly consider the interests of others before we consider our own (see Rom 12:9-21; Phil 2:3-4; Col 3:12-15).

God's love is completed in unity. In His dark hours, Jesus gained strength from focussing on the unity between He and His heavenly father and His prayers and thoughts reflect their oneness of relationship. Unity in a relationship cannot be under-estimated, because unity and oneness add a

dimension to a relationship that moves it to another level. Unity in a relationship enhances the quality of trust that can be shared, and the confidence that there will be perfect faithfulness, and the peace that comes with utter dependability. Any lack of unity will take its toll of such things. A relationship with real unity is a relationship of great comfort, a haven of safety in life and a bringer of peace. Paul always links unity with peace (Col 3:14-15). Unity makes a love relationship so very very tender. This is the love of God.

Our journey into the image of God will reveal deepening tenderness as we step from one layer into another because at the centre of that journey is the heart of God. So the second layer of discovery will be more tender and sensitive than the first, and the 3rd layer more tender and sensitive than the second, and the 4th layer more tender and sensitive than the 3rd. This is our journey.

But there's something else I want to say. In creation God gave something up. We were given freewill and freedom of choice, and in this gift to us God yielded up control over us. Remembering that God's love is sacrificial, I suggest that yielding up control of us was an acutely loving act, because only by the exercise of freewill and choice can we experience the real depth of a relationship. God gave up control over us so that we could have freewill and by that know the greater joy of a relationship of choice and not of compulsion. Of course, choice implies the risk of rejection and this is a risk that God took (part of the sacrifice of love), because a risk of rejection makes richer any choice to be faithful. God wants us to enjoy this greater depth of love.

Then there is grief, because love that is rejected produces grief. If there was no love there would be no sense of loss and thus no grief. This is why the hymn-writer says...*sorrow and love flow mingled down*...because the measure of God's love is in the depth of His grief felt by our rejection..... and this brings me to the real relevance of all of this to the ministry of reconciliation. God's love and grief combine to create an ever present unceasing yearning for our reconciliation. This is the most powerful theme in the Bible. I believe that scholars would say that the power of the language of reconciliation attributed to God in the Hebrew scriptures is far stronger than anything else and that the scriptures are full of images of tenderness towards His people that surpass the ability of language to properly describe, in spite of every right that God has to be angry and retributive for repeated rejection.

The nature of God's relationship with us is variously described in scripture, such as our royal guardian and protector, our master, our shepherd, our brother, and our father (see for eg. Is 40:10-11), but the most tender of all images is that of a lover in the intimacy marriage. A beautiful example is found in Hosea, where the prophet speaks to the nation from his own experience of forgiving an unfaithful wife, and says that he will... *speak tenderly to her to allure her back to him, and then she will be able to call him her husband instead of her master* (Hos 2:14-16). The reconciliation moves the relationship from the formal to the intimate, and the gentleness of the process portrays the remarkable mercy of God. Hosea provides another example of God's mercy in the face of repeated rejection and profound grief *God will never give up or turn away from His children..... His heart is changed within.....all his compassion is aroused and he will not carry out his anger....He is God and not man.....and will not come in wrath* (Hos 11:8-9).

These images show the depth of value and unique preciousness that every individual has to God, and point to the dream that God has for each person to be restored to Him, not just as an object of creation, but as member of that family of the Godhead in unrestricted tenderness and intimacy. Indeed if this is the value of each person to God, then it is the key to determining how we should deal with our fellow man, for every time we humiliate someone, or treat someone with indignity, rudeness, or disrespect, we are doing it to God and adding to His grief. If we are committed to living in conformity with the image of God we will see in the eyes of every person, no matter how scarred, marred, blotched or depraved, the preciousness that God sees and we should try and treat that person in a way that will demonstrate God's love for them.

Earlier I talked about layers of tenderness. Now I want to talk about layers of human relationship. First, there are what I call the anonymous relationships (there's an oxymoron!) by which I mean the fleeting connection we would have with a shop keeper or a waiter, or even another driver in traffic....a person who just comes across our path and with whom it is unlikely that we'll ever have any future contact. I suspect that too often, because of the fleetingness of this type of encounter, we are just as rude and obnoxious as the next person, especially if we find service inadequate or an attitude annoying..... or if we think nobody we know is going to see. A good test to apply to my behaviour is to ask the question...what would that person say about me to their co-worker or someone sitting with them in their car? Things like...*what's his problem, or.... he got out of the wrong side of bed, or...wouldn't like to live with him...*? Furthermore, that other person may be in a bad mood themselves,

or having a depressing day or a struggle with some issue of their life. Would the encounter with you have made them moodier or more despondent or even added to their anger ? Or would they have been left with a moment of pleasantness instead ? You might think this is trivial but I think it's the grass roots or seed capital of our calling to be reconcilers because these are people for whom God's love and sorrow combine into His yearning for their return to Him. There is a beautiful expression in Titus (2:10) that I love and find helpful in all of this, that by our behaviour.....*we might add lustre to the doctrine of God our Saviour.* (NEB).

In the next layer are relationships with commitment. These are friendships, and the likes of work relationships etc., and obviously marriage. In this level of relationship, where there is fallout, I suggest that the goal should be the recovery of unity rather than the discovery of fault. This is very hard because if I have been wronged, then I want to take the moral high ground and hide behind a fault principle. In terms of the image of God though, unity is more important, and this is logical when one thinks about it because if we are unified we'll be more likely to deal with any fault issue sensibly and in harmony. In this level of relationship, the real sadness is in the fact of the fallout and not in the reason why, and so I suggest that after the fallout, the first party who comes to the point of strength and humility to express sorrow for the rift and apologise for the fact of it, has a duty to do so and thus begin a process of reconciliation that will in it's own way empower the other party as well.

The 3rd layer are societal relationships....our connection with our community as citizens. In this level, there is sometimes skepticism about the validity of community works as part of the gospel, such works being categorized in a demeaning expression, the "social gospel". This point of view is based on the belief that it is more important to save the soul than to alleviate plight. The Gospel knows no such distinction because the words and the works of the Gospel are interdependent. How can words be given any meaning without works. How can you show some-one who is marginalised in society whether by social injustice or by their own actions, the loving concern of God for their well being without doing acts of love. James says that *faith without works is dead* (James 2:17), and it is claimed St Francis of Assisi said that we should.... *preach the Gospel at all times and by all means, and if necessary – speak.* Anyone who with or without words does acts of tenderness and of self-giving love to their fellow man is revealing something of the character of God to that person and is doing the Gospel. Such acts represent the beckoning smile of God to be reconciled to His love, because for so long as we live on terra firma, God's love has always been committed to the existence of societies where there is safety in homes, food and freedom, the dignity of work and protection from violation. This is the ministry of reconciliation.

Let's be reminded at this time of the year, the second Sunday in advent, that the way of return to God is handed to us in the cradle of Bethlehem, the Carpenter of Nazareth and the Cross of Calvary. That's why we call it the season of peace and goodwill because it signifies the loving initiative that God undertook to bring us back to where he intended. And so for Christians when we see the pain and destruction of dysfunction in our society, if we react angrily and retributively, we are reacting just like the Godless. If we are to display the character of the God in whose image we are made, then like Him anger and outrage should be replaced with love and sorrow. Like our Heavenly Father is to us we should be to others. We should be in love with the ministry of reconciliation and be the initiators of restoration in our troubled world.

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