

Reconciliation

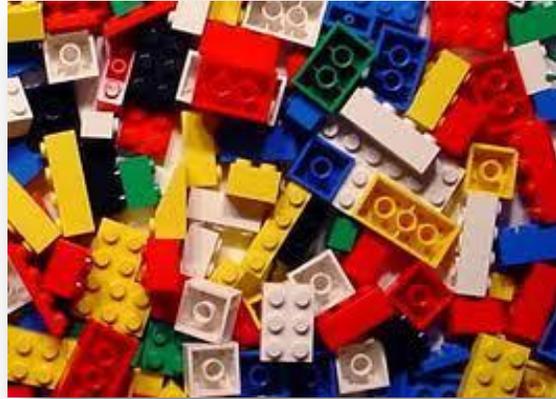
Thoughts for Good Friday 2012

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All this is from God, **who reconciled us to himself through Christ** and gave us the **ministry of reconciliation**: that **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ**, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the **message of reconciliation**.

We are therefore **Christ's ambassadors**, as though God were making his appeal through us. We **implore you** on Christ's behalf: **Be reconciled to God**. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5: 18-21



In recent days and weeks I have, on occasion, felt helpless before what seems like insurmountable duties to be the right kind of parent, teacher, friend, family member, human being. This will not be an unusual thing for most of you. I am sure we all feel overwhelmed by expectations and how great the gap is between what we *are* and what we are *supposed* to be.

After one afternoon two weeks ago of feeling particularly useless, and having a very long cry, it struck me that I felt like what I imagined as a pile of Lego blocks – if it could feel, might feel like. I felt...disassembled. I felt as though I had been reduced to my basic component parts, no form or function, and in this un-built state, at the mercy of the forces around me. A state of chaos...

Simply put, the Cross is what I must look to. In reconciling me to Himself, God builds me, replaces my chaotic bits and pieces with a whole being. This is not of my doing; it is of God's doing... At one level we might speak of restoration, but I think *reconciliation* actually enables creation *anew*.

The Cross not only makes it possible for me to be reconciled to God, the Cross helps me to assemble myself into something *better* in order to be reconciled to God.

If the Cross does all that just for me: what might it also do for our society, our societies? The Cross is not a private asset just to benefit me in my faith journey. It has real things to say to us all about what life could be like were we all to allow God to build us, in

community with each other from the ground up, and to accept his gift of reconciliation to us.

A number of things leap out at me from the passage I read that might give us a few clues:

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1. Reconciliation is not something we can do ourselves.

Nor is it something we can claim for ourselves by being better Christians than other Christians.

First, let's look at the Greek terms for reconciliation:

Katallage – reconciliation

Katallasso – to reconcile.

In the Greek there is a strong suggestion of transformation, with a necessary implication that there is some kind of renewal of the state between humanity and God.

[kata] allaso: to change, to exchange one thing for another, to transform

The financial sense of reconciliation, in the financial context of reconciling accounts, is used in the New Testament. By us being reconciled to God the debts we owe are cancelled, the ledger is balanced.

The form used in 2 Cor.5:18-21 is passive. This is really important in helping me work out what I need to do. I can't reconcile with God, although I can cry out to God and prepare myself for God, it is God who reconciles me, who scoops me up into him, building me in the process. I need this act of reconciliation desperately to undo the damage that I have done and caused by turning my face from God so, so many times. We all need this.

2. *Although I cannot reconcile to God, I can make it possible for me to accept the reconciliation that has already occurred. I do have agency*

How I can act is to:

1. Prepare myself for reconciliation, forgive those that owe me, and pay what I owe to others, settle my accounts. This is, by its very nature, a collaborative exercise, not something I can do myself.
2. accept this reconciliation, and then;
3. in my turn, to be myself an agent of reconciliation.

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3. *Reconciliation is vertical, but in preparing ourselves to accept it we must also consider the idea of a horizontal reconciliation.*

My individual reconciliation to God, by way of the Cross, my transformation into this new state is only part of the story. I cannot prepare myself for reconciliation without the help of others, nor without helping others.

How do we translate this individual act of acceptance of reconciliation for the various component groups of our society, this great pile of Lego that we have together created? To accept God's reconciliation do we not have to undergo and create a kind of horizontal reconciliation and transformation amongst ourselves?

One of the reasons I say this preparation is a collaborative exercise is because of another verse, which features the notion of "reconciliation". (Matthew 5:22-24).

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:22-24

Here no doubt, there is much context that I am ignoring, but the aorist imperative passive form of ***allasso*** – ***[dia]allagethi*** (***[δια] αλλάγηθι***) is present, and properly translated as “you be reconciled”. Which strongly reaffirms to me that the reconciliation of the Cross is not only a vertical process. God reconciles us to Himself, by way of the Cross, yes.

But we as individuals and groups, and societies must work out how to accept this incredible act, and what that means in our lives. But our preparation for reconciliation must also take place horizontally. How are we truly to accept reconciliation when we still harbour bitterness and discord against our brothers or sisters who also has been given the very self-same gift?

And just who is our brother or our sister that we are divided from? I see this in a similar light to the question as that asked by the young man of Jesus in Luke 10:29 “who then is my neighbour”? Perhaps the answer is just as demanding and shocking, as was Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan.

If we are truly to be able to accept God’s gift and to let the Cross work in our lives, we are bound to reach across the divides not only between us and those close to us, but surely also of gender, income, race and class. If we pay attention to ourselves it is not hard to see how we are divided from others in our society. This is not a matter of wallowing in inherited guilt, it is just a fact of living in society. Sometimes we can see our divisions reflected to us from our popular media. Listen to the following selected headlines gathered hastily from the last three months of the *NZ Herald*.

“Reforms aim to break welfare cycle”

“Welfare reform 'beneficiary bashing'”

“Madness to support work-shy drones”

“The great betrayal of our poorer folk”

“Poverty trap set at birth – study”

“Benefit cheats: The \$22m rip-off”

Just judging by the tone of these headlines alone, there is a class of people, not you, not me, who belong in the box labelled beneficiaries. They are stuck in a cycle. They don't want to work. They are trapped. From birth. They cheat. They get 'bashed' by the media and politicians. They are 'our folk' but the presumption lurking underneath is that 'they' are not 'us'.

Do we share these presumptions? Does preparing to accept the gift of reconciliation force us to examine our presumptions and prejudices? I think it does, but more than this it should force us to address not only our perceptions but the reality of poverty in our society and what our role should be in its alleviation, as well as in its creation. In fact, in my view it calls into questions our entire welfare system, a system that is predicated upon setting up walls between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Those who have, and those who have not.

I'll come back to this point shortly, because I think the ministry of reconciliation could have profound implications for how we deal with poverty, and the alleviation of poverty. But suffice to say horizontal reconciliation is, I think, an important precursor to our acceptance of vertical reconciliation from God.

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4. Preparing ourselves so we can truly accept the gift of reconciliation is hard

Maybe this duty to ready ourselves is hard, but the gift itself remains unconditional. God has already reconciled us. He doesn't give it only to those of us who are good enough, it is there for us all to accept. But if we really want to be built anew and enter into the Kingdom, we have to eliminate our debts somehow.

As a part of the readying process, forgiveness is hard, as illuminated by Mark earlier today, forgiveness of others and of ourselves is the necessary step before we can be reconciled. But, to follow the balance sheet analogy, the call to the ministry of reconciliation is more about readying ourselves, not only forgiving the debts we are owed **but also** redistributing or paying out whatever surpluses we may have gathered up, or paying off debts that we may yet owe; of making sure we are in a fit state to accept the reconciliation of the Cross.



To forgive debts owed to us, and to pay out what we owe to others means we have to be honest with ourselves, acknowledge where we fall short and identify what is in our power to make right. But more than this, we must love.

This is a hard thing to do because it means clearing ourselves of our bitterness and those things undone and unsaid that we want to have said and have done. It means letting go of our pride in ourselves. What we do to discharge our debts to others has to be given freely and it has to *count*. The discharge of our debts has to be real, willingly undertaken, and not a mere token.

I came across this next excerpt from 2008, among the Standing Orders of the Diocese of Auckland, a standing resolution from 1979. I was interested because among all the standing resolutions of that Diocese, this was the only one that mentioned a ministry of reconciliation.

15. Ministry of Reconciliation and the Maori Language

THAT this Synod acknowledges and reminds the people of the Diocese that:

- a. the Church is called to the Ministry of Reconciliation,
- b. therefore Christian New Zealanders whose first language is not Maori have an obligation to learn to pronounce Maori personal and place names.

Now, I absolutely agree that this should be a matter of importance for any church governing body. I live with the mangling of the Māori language, and my name, every day. I cringe inside so many times a day I think it is an automatic reflex! But I struggle without more context to see how the placing of this duty on non-Māori speaking members alone reflects reconciliation in any deep way.

No doubt if I knew more about this situation I might revisit that opinion. I just wonder if we can reconcile by demanding things from one another or setting up rules that place obligations on each other. Is this activity really truly one that discharges a debt from Pakeha to Maori? Maybe it is. Maybe it can be a small step. Maybe, though, it is a token gesture that does not really engender true change.

Of course, sometimes we need guidance in how to discharge what we owe others. We are steeped in our own ignorance of how much hurt as individuals and as members of a collective we are responsible for; and unlike the Western legal framework, Christian thinking seems to understand group accountability. Without reminders and education of how we have behaved badly, either in this generation or in past generations, how can we open ourselves, acknowledge those wrongs and become reconciled? I just hesitate though at the notion that there is a duty always to point out the motes in each-others' eyes. There are so many in our own.¹

An urgent question we need to consider: what does the Cross show us about horizontal reconciliation between Maori and Pakeha in the Treaty settlements era? What does the Cross say to the Crown and Maori as we shift into a new paradigm of relationships no longer derived so explicitly from historical grievance. What does the Cross show Maori in an era when the Crown is, as Justice Williams said in the Wai 262 Report *Ko Aotearoa Tenei*, “increasingly Maori”. To think about how reconciliation can be discoverable not only our own lives but in the life of the nation requires an act of imagination, as well as of faith.

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¹ Matt.7:3-5.



To finish then, I want to imagine what impact reconciliation could have in the context of welfare. While Matthew 5:22-24 instructs us to become reconciled to those divided from us, what if this thinking could be applied to the institutions that helped create the divide between rich and poor in the first place?

While our social security (or welfare) system was created as it currently is in the 1930s to combat the existence of poverty and hardship in our society, and to enable the government to step in and enable families to continue when a wage earner was taken out of action, it has never been the case that social security has been an unconditional provision to members of our community who have happened upon hard times. We have always required people to *work*, to *pay*, to *open themselves* to public scrutiny, to justify their needs being met.

In a perverse kind of way I can see this as a form of reverse reconciliation, the Government has the power to reconcile the poor to the rest of society, if only those poor can fit the criteria, can be good enough. This is no unconditional gift. Only if you are

justified enough in your need can you expect assistance from the State. The poor must account.

This approach has remained largely unchanged since the 1930s...the extent of targeting changes, and some regimes are more generous than others, more civic minded even, but the central plank of the accountability of the poor to the government in return for assistance remains.

Yet, if we provided for poverty in our society in a way that truly came from our understanding of the Cross and the reconciliation we get from the Cross, perhaps our costly targeted system would be done away with, replaced by unconditional payments supported by a more equitable tax structure. Perhaps we might understand poverty relief not as a debt that the poor need to repay by their future good behaviour or their current work-test compliance, but we might see such relief as something that is a gift available to us by virtue of our membership in this society, and as a way of healing potential or actual divides. Perhaps this could contribute to the eradication of poverty full stop. Perhaps some of the divisions that exist in our society might actually begin to erase. Perhaps we can more easily accept and live the gift of reconciliation. Perhaps chaos might recede just a little.