



From estrangement to communion

A theology of reconciliation



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Coventry Cathedral has a particular calling to the ministry of reconciliation. The medieval cathedral was destroyed on the night of 14 November 1940. Provost Howard, looking at the destruction around him after the bombing, took the bold decision to not only remember the past but to look forward when he held two charred pieces of wood from the ruins and said, 'Father forgive'. Three of the medieval roof nails found in the ruins were bound together into the form of a cross – the cross of nails. A new cathedral was built and they looked forward with hope to a time of peace and reconciliation.¹

Part of Coventry Cathedral's reconciliation ministry is centred on the Community of the Cross of Nails (CCN). The CCN has three major strands:

- Healing the wounds of the past.
- Living with difference and celebrating diversity.
- Building a culture of peace.

On the move

Reconciliation is a journey – from the past, through the present, to the future. This journey of reconciliation involves all of us. Reconciliation journeys start with the same thing – our stories. God's story, your story, my story. We are not all the same and we do not all need to agree on everything all the time, but how can we live with difference well if we do not know something about each other, if we do not share our stories, if we do not try to understand the other? There are potentially dangerous consequences if we do not try to understand the other and their perspective.

Fear of the other, power imbalance and hate can all flourish when we are unable to live with difference.

Last year I spent part of Holy Week and Easter on a peace walk in Northern Iraq, in Kurdistan.² About 20 of us from Europe and others walked with local Christians, Muslims and Yazidis. We walked for peace, to proclaim the possibility of peace in that fought-over land. On Good Friday we visited a village about 30km from Mosul (the ancient city of Nineveh), a village that had been destroyed by ISIS, the villagers having all fled or worse. It was a place of destruction, completely devoid of life. Houses were rubble, shops damaged and the church, though still standing, had been desecrated. The altar was broken and lying in rubble. We could hear Mosul being shelled. We held a Good Friday service in the desecrated church. We laid candles that we had brought with us in the shape of a cross in front of the destroyed altar and prayed the prayers of Good Friday, the pain and lament for Jesus, and for healing, for the end to that conflict, for peace. I placed a small cross of nails on the broken altar as a sign of Christ's peace.

On Easter Day we returned to that deserted village and desecrated church. However, this time the bleakness in the church was transformed. The same rubble was there, the same bullet holes in the walls, the same broken crosses and hacked memorials, but now the church was full of people from the surrounding villages. There were flowers on the altar and there were children dressed in white. The congregation was there to proclaim the hope of the resurrection, the hope of

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1. The ruins of the old cathedral have been preserved as a reminder of the folly and waste war. The decision to build a new cathedral was not an act of defiance, but rather a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world.

2. A quarter of people living in Northern Iraq live in refugee camps, people internally displaced from their own country due to ISIS attacks.

3. D Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (London: Rider, 1999), p. 213.

4. H Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Conditions Facing Modern Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 212–13.

5. A Bash, 'Did Jesus Discover Forgiveness?', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41.3 (2013), pp. 382–99.

6. JP Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), p. 13.

7. RJ Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 58.

8. All biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

9. G Smyth & S Graham, *Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Justice* (Belfast: Centre for Contemporary Christianity/ECONI, 2003), p. 3.

peace and the possibility of rebuilding. The local Peshmerga, the soldiers came to receive their Easter communion. The foundation of a rebuilt community was born that day. There was a space for remembering and for reconciliation, for moving from despair to hope, hostility to peace, conflict to reconciliation.

A biblical mandate

An understanding of the theology of reconciliation is crucial for us in our broken world today. Do we stick with the world's answers, or do we believe that God really changes everything? How can a theology of reconciliation help us as we seek to respond to violence and conflict? An understanding of reconciliation in today's world is vital where white-gated communities trump cardboard shacks, where the colour of your skin, your gender or your ethnicity can deny you justice.

As Christians we have all been given a mandate for understanding and practising reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5.11–21. So how do we understand a theology of reconciliation? Drawing principles of reconciliation ministry out of story, and specifically the Iraq peace walk story, we can say that reconciliation involves pilgrimage. On a pilgrimage we journey towards a place of encounter, bringing our lives in all their conflict and brokenness. The space of encounter is sacred: we meet God. Then we journey out again, changed and transformed, ready to share our new understanding and ability to act in the world.

We do that together, embodied and in a real space. We come from our lives and, then, in the sharing of our selves, our stories, we can walk together. We meet others and share our journey, in all its pain, woundedness and hope. We do that in fellowship, learning how to listen, to see, to experience the other. We also recognise our need for each other on this pilgrimage. We are linked in the spirit of ubuntu: 'I exist because you exist.' Our stories are linked. We need each other.

In the space of pilgrimage, we learn about the process (often long) of reconciliation. The component parts of the journey include truth, acknowledgement, remembering, story telling, lament, repentance, forgiveness, justice, restitution, etc. This is all undergirded by a spirituality of reconciliation. We surround the reconciliation journey in prayer, in Scripture, in the journey through the cross, and especially in the Eucharist. We share the body of Christ together as the broken, shared, blessed body of Christ in the world, the community of Christian people. Then we take our selves out again to act as agents of transformation, as reconcilers.

Forgiveness

Looking then in more detail at a theology of reconciliation, we see that historical teachings from Paul, the early Church Fathers, through the

medieval period to the Reformation and beyond have much to inform the current debates. Old and New Testament biblical scholarship is, of course, informative when discussing concepts such as covenant, shalom and forgiveness.

*'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 toward 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', as he hangs from His cross with outflung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything, in cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong. There are no aliens; all belong in one family, God's family, and the human family.'*³

Desmond Tutu articulates the hope of reconciliation for all. This is clearly a Christian hope, and places reconciliation firmly in the theological arena. Forgiveness is at the heart of Tutu's theology of reconciliation and, indeed, the Christian gospel. However, forgiveness is not a straightforward subject, and views on it and its place within the reconciliation journey differ widely, even from within the Christian perspective.

Where, then, if at all, does forgiveness fit in the reconciliation paradigm? Hannah Arendt writes of Jesus being the 'discoverer' of forgiveness.⁴ Whether or not that is the case,⁵ there is no doubting the role forgiveness can play in reconciling relationships, in both the secular and the sacred. While forgiveness is one of the key concepts to consider, there are others including justice, repentance, truth, peace, remembering, not to mention restitution.

Transforming relationships

Reconciliation can be seen as primarily between God and humanity, but it is also interpersonal, social, national, international and ecological. It can be seen as process, or goal, or both. For instance, John Paul Lederach uses Psalm 85 as a model for reconciliation, drawing out truth, justice, mercy and peace as necessary and transformative processes leading towards reconciliation, which is at once journey, encounter and place.⁶

At the heart of reconciliation are relationships, connections or reconnections: between humanity and God; between me and you; us and them. Robert Schreiter captures what I take as the core theological meaning of reconciliation: 'To enter into a process of reconciliation is better described as entering *mysterion*, a pathway in which God leads us out of suffering and alienation into the experience of the grace of reconciliation. This grace is transforming, and creates the conditions of possibility not only for forgiving our enemies, but also helping them to rediscover their humanity.'⁷

Reconciliation, then, is about transforming relationships, about reconnecting. Reconciliation, however, clearly does not just 'happen', even though soteriologically grace is foremost in the enabling of these transformative relationships. Several core components are necessary for these reconstructions that make up the reconciliation journey: acknowledgement; remembering; truth; lament; understanding of the effect on the other (and self); repentance; transformation; restitution; justice; forgiveness.

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Smyth and Graham argue that the interplay between God's saving purpose and human sin, where forgiveness and reconciliation are placed, has a long biblical heritage, in both Old and New Testaments. They quote examples of fidelity and treachery (Cain and Abel); the coexistence of goodness and betrayal (Hagar, King David); and the world as both the arena of grace (John 3.16) and grace rejected (John 1.11).⁸ If we truly recognise the world as God's creation, we cannot designate it as beyond the realm of grace. The world of politics and public life falls within God's reconciling purpose.⁹

The process of reconciliation

So what does the process of reconciliation actually look like amidst all this? Liechty and Clegg argue that a true understanding of reconciliation has to be 'built on the interlocking dynamics of forgiveness, repentance, truth and justice, understood in part as religiously rooted virtues, but also as basic dynamics (even when unnamed or unrecognised) of human interaction, including public life and therefore politics'.¹⁰ John de Gruchy writes that the process of reconciliation is 'a human and social process that requires theological explanation, and a theological concept seeking human and social embodiment'.¹¹

Reconciliation then, I would argue, following Liechty and Clegg and also de Gruchy, is a process which must be theological and human, social and political. It is a process that entails both understanding and action, or theory and praxis. John de Gruchy sees four interrelated ways of looking at the process of reconciliation. The first is theological and refers to reconciliation between God and humanity, which then allows for 'a shared life and language'. The second is interpersonal reconciliation, or the relationships between individuals. The third is social, such as between communities or local groups. The fourth is political. He writes, 'Reconciliation is, if you like, a journey

from the past into the future, a journey from estrangement to communion, or from what was patently unjust in search of a future that is just'.¹²

A theology of reconciliation that is about bringing a just future into communion with others lends itself to my view of reconciliation as being necessarily relational, and a process, rather than a static event.

In order to explore this further, I turn to Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf's work. In *Exclusion and Embrace* Volf writes that in order to address the problems we face in our world of exclusion and difference, of hatred and misuse of power over those who are not like us, that there is a need for a cross-centred act of relationship, or what he calls 'the embrace of reconciliation'.¹³ This 'drama of embrace' encapsulates four moments: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening them again.

In this cross-shaped embrace, firstly, opening the arms signifies a reaching out for relationship with the other, a desire for a sharing of myself with the other (do the action). Secondly, waiting signifies 'non-invasion'. My desire has been made clear, now it is up to you, 'the other', to respond. Thirdly, in closing the arms, the goal of the embrace is reached, and it must be reciprocal, but not overpowering or unequal. Fourthly, the final act of opening the arms again needs to happen if one's boundary is not to become subsumed into the other. This final opening of the arms also allows for further embrace as we look forward to the future.

Robert Schreiter privileges the importance of the 'new creation'. He delineates the process of reconciliation, based on Paul's writings, as follows: reconciliation first and foremost is the work of God; God's reconciling work begins with the victim; God makes of both the victim and the wrongdoer 'a new creation'; the Christian places suffering inside the story of the suffering and death of Christ; and full reconciliation will happen only when God will be all in all.¹⁴ Both of these arguments, i.e. the necessity of both divine grace and then human relationships for reconciliation, and the link back to God, are core to my understanding of reconciliation, both theologically and in the social setting, in a community and in ministry.

Conclusion

In his Son's death and resurrection, in his body, God enables us to inhabit his blessings. That is why and how we inhabit this space we find ourselves in today, how we as committed disciples of Christ can tilt our communities towards reconciliation. That is how and why we live with difference and celebrate diversity. That is how we live with the gifts of blessing we receive as peacemakers. That is how and why we live the gospel, the gospel of reconciliation.

NOTES

10. J Liechty & C Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001), p. 44.

11. J De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM, 2002), p. 26.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

13. M Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

14. R Schreiter, 'The Theology of Reconciliation and Peacemaking for Mission' in *Mission – Violence and Reconciliation* (eds H Mellor & TE Yates; Sheffield: Cliff College Publishing, 2004), pp. 11–28, (p.18).