

Isaiah 10:33-11:9

Ephesians 2:13-18

Introduction

On Remembrance Sunday our thoughts turn to those who have laid down their lives in war; both world wars that have much in our thoughts in recent years as we marked major anniversaries; we also remember those who have been wounded and killed in more modern conflicts; in Northern Ireland, in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan and this year we are also remembering the civilians killed in conflict in Yemen, Ethiopia, Syria and Afghanistan and acts of terror that continue throughout the world. We remember their sacrifice of those who died with a sense of sadness and also deep gratitude for all they have won for us. Yet when we consider the price of war it is appropriate to think about reconciliation and resolution of conflict. We live in a time of international conflict and uncertainty when our country is at war with terrorism and many of us are uneasy about what the future holds for us.

At the heart of the Bible's message is reconciliation. Its whole thrust is about reconciliation between mankind and God and the price that God was prepared to pay in order to bring that about. If we can take the message of the Good News to societies torn apart by conflict, helping people to take its message seriously will alter lives and heal communities.

And this is the crux of the matter. If we were able to really absorb and live by the message of the Bible it would transform our church, our society and our world. It would bring healing and hope and reconciliation where there is only bitterness and hatred.

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Conflict can be creative. It is not by itself always a bad thing. The scriptures don't condemn disagreement. The simple fact is that God has made us all to be different. That difference can be hugely enriching and creative. It enables us to see things from a variety of perspectives. The best in art challenges our existing view of a subject and enables us to see it in a different way; and dissatisfaction with the way something is, often acts as a stimulus for change and enables us to make new discoveries.

Conflict comes when we find it hard to reconcile the differences between us. The problem is not in the difference of view or opinion in itself but in the way that we handle the differences. Conflict has the potential to be destructive. The warning in scripture is not related to the conflict itself but to what we do with it. It is surprising how quickly we can move from a position which says, "We disagree. Let's talk about it." To one in which we say, "We disagree. It's too painful to talk about it."

The problem with being in this position is that if there is no resolution of differences we can move from a position of simply feeling hurt to wanting to get even and to win. In the case of conflict between races the desire to injure and hurt can easily become the move to genocide - the attempt to remove all memory of the other race from the earth. We have seen this often in the past thirty years in conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, the treatment of the Kurds by Iraq and even now in the conflicts in Gaza, Afghanistan and

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Syria, and in Mian Mar with the attack on Rohingya Muslims and China with the suppression of the Uyghur population in the north-western region of Xinjiang.

Jesus tells us that we must stop conflict reaching these proportions. He warns of the danger of unresolved anger, saying that it is as bad as murder because that is what it can lead to. He tells us. "Therefore, if you are offering a 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 5:23-24) In other words there is no action more sacred, more important than the necessity of reconciliation when conflict has gone beyond honest difference and open discussion. We must stop the hurt, the grievance from going any further; Even to the point of leaving unfinished our worship of God in order to put things right.

The scriptures make a clear connection between the death of Christ and reconciliation with God. That reconciliation becomes a message that extends reconciliation to all and between all. In his second letter to the Corinthians St Paul says this, "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 men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor 5:18-19)

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When I was a student nurse there was a bit of hospital wisdom that went like this, "If the consultant had a bad day they took it out on the registrar, who took it out on the houseman, who took it out on the Ward Sister, who took it out on the staff nurse, who took it out on the student nurses who took it out on the probationer who went home and kicked the cat! I always felt sorry for the poor cat ! - but it shows the chain of aggression that can happen. When we get angry we need to find some way of discharging that anger.

When I was a nanny to a two year old boy I saw this operating powerfully. One day I had to tell Joshua off for something. I don't remember what - but I told him he had been very naughty. After I had finished he stomped into the Utility room stood in front of the washing machine and gave it a piece of his mind! I was surprised it didn't burst into tears! But he had discharged his anger and everything was all right.

The death of Christ on the cross did for us what that washing machine did for Joshua. In dying on the cross, Jesus didn't fight back but instead he absorbed the anger and violence of the universe. It needed to go no further. It is that action of Christ that offers us a new way of dealing with conflict and of beginning our ministry of reconciliation.

Soccer star David Beckham found notoriety in 1998 when the England team was dismissed from the World Cup Finals on a penalty shootout. Beckham had been sent off for a foolish foul that had left the England team with only ten players for half of the match. Taking the

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view that the defeat might not have happened if he had not acted so irresponsibly, the media rounded on him and blamed him for the defeat.

After the England manager Glenn Hoddle asked the public to give Beckham another chance, The Bible Society issued a press release, suggesting that this was an opportunity for people to exercise forgiveness. Among the flood of responses from national and local media, one radio station carried out a poll of listeners and learned that a very high percentage were not prepared to forgive him.

Reflecting on this incident in his book "Why the cross" Martin Robinson, Bible Society's director of mission and Theology said this: "Why would people steadfastly refuse to forgive someone who had never injured them personally (though clearly some England supporters take defeat very personally!) Could it be that the reason for this was that it is easier to have a scapegoat and that to forgive would be somehow to bear the defeat themselves". Of course we all know that David Beckham redeemed himself and became a hero in 2002 when he scored that hat-trick against Germany but he went through a very difficult time when he was reviled and blamed for his actions.

The inability to forgive can be very far reaching. We may not think small grudges are worth worrying over. But if we are not able to forgive each other in the small things then we certainly won't be able to do so in the large. The challenge that the Bible faces us with is: Are we able to take its message of reconciliation and

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forgiveness seriously? Are we able to let it challenge us and change the way we live with each other? If we are looking for peace and harmony in our world we have to start with ourselves, our families, our communities, and our churches.

To close I'll leave you with the words of Anasthase Kajugiro, General Secretary of the Bible Society in Rwanda where they are working for reconciliation there. "If we are to live together, we have to go beyond hatred and sadness. Especially, Christians have to be the light and salt of this world and bring back peacefulness and togetherness."