

The Power of Reconciliation in Christ

There is no force on earth like the power of God to break down barriers between people, enabling them to forgive and start over and make relationships “work”. Christianity is fundamentally relational.

When things go wrong

The Sistine Chapel in Vatican City is one of the most celebrated religious sites in the world. Built in the late fifteenth century during the time of Pope Sixtus IV (the first mass was held in 1483), it has been visited by untold millions of tourists. The entire chapel is a work of art, with scenes from the Bible and church traditions covering every wall and the massive ceiling. The subjects are divided into three epochs: before the ten commandments were given by God to Moses, between Moses and the birth of Christ, and the Christian era, according to the medieval concept of world history and links between Moses and Christianity.

The most striking scene in the chapel is the hand of God stretched out to Adam, as depicted by Michael Angelo. Out of the chaos his hand practically touches God’s finger, there is a sense of hope for the prospects of humanity. It is the nature of God to take the initiative and reach out, to reconcile men and women to himself.

The Bible tells us that Adam was created in the image of God, made for fellowship with Him (Genesis 2:5-25). When he disobeyed God (Genesis 3), that fellowship was broken and Adam “hid” from the presence of his Maker. He actually tried to avoid him. (Sound familiar?) Ultimately driven out of the Garden of Eden, he lived and died as God’s enemy. As a consequence of his choices, every one of his descendants has been at war with God. The tragic result was that this man, created to live forever and in perfect fellowship with the Creator of the Universe, died spiritually the day he rejected the word of God and ultimately perished physically. Instead of being used to love and serve God his technically amazingly body disintegrated, turned to dust and was mixed with the ground.

Every one of Adam’s descendants has suffered the same fate, the consequence of being alienated from God. The Scripture tells us that, when Adam died, we also died (Romans 5:12-21). When he put up a wall to shut God out of his life, we did so as well. From birth we are separated from His life. A sense of alienation , of anomie, continues to touch the human story and the tragedy of death is inevitable. Left to ourselves we are “without God and without hope in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). So, by definition, an atheist is literally “someone without God” Atheism does not inspire hope; it guarantees a death of hope, a sense of despair. We all need God.

Human religion is posited on fear of God and the supernatural world, terror of death and the hereafter. In a world in which war is commonplace, and the means of prosecuting it increasingly sophisticated and deadly, the nations spend more on arms than education, health or job creation combined. If only we could redirect money spent on conflict, the human race would be fed, educated and provided with good shelter. But conflict and instability will continue as long as men and women are separated from the Prince of Peace. "They have not known the way of peace" (Romans 3:17).

Some conflicts appear intractable

The downstream effect of this alienation is that man has also been at war with himself throughout history. I have visited numerous theatres of conflict and there is nothing appealing about the way we manage things without God. Every day communities and families break up, unable to find common ground, having no wells of forgiveness from which to draw, no sense of purpose that can form an architecture for their lives and destinies.

I remember standing inside the de-militarised zone along the green line separating Greek Cypriot and Turkish troops in the divided island of Cyprus, shaking my head at the inability of the opposing sides to find any common ground despite the social, economic and political cost of division. In 1974 Turkish troops had invaded the north of Cyprus. The capital, Nicosia, was divided into a Turkish Cypriot section to the north and a Greek Cypriot sector to the south. The opposing sides were separated by UN troops. Government offices and several large churches lie just inside the Greek Section. Overshadowing them (aurally and visibly) are the minarets of mosques and large Turkish flags. Investment and modernization have been large restricted to the Greek area. The armed belligerents sit inside bunkers along the Green Line and stare at one another, twenty-four hours a day. On a mountainside behind the Turkish-controlled part of the city is an enormous painted Turkish flag, taunting Greek Cypriots and reminding them they have lost half off their republic. It almost seems that neither side wants compromise. The state of conflict has become so entrenched that if a genuine settlement breaks out the parties will probably be shocked.

Twenty minutes away by air, heavily armed Israeli soldiers and Lebanese Hezbollah ("Party of God") guerillas glare at one another along the Lebanese-Israeli border. As I talked to international troops charged with keeping the peace, there was an air of resignation. "No one wants peace." One soldier told me he often felt like packing up and going home and leaving the parties to the conflict to fight it out to the last man. Fighters from both sides survey disputed land and occasionally fire at one another. A Hezbollah rocket is launched against an Israeli settlement. Israel jets scream over Sidon, Tyre and Beirut in a show of strength, too high to be fired on effectively and those on the ground duck for cover as exploded ordnance falls back to the earth. Villages straddle the border

and some peoples' homes are actually located in two sovereign countries locked in a seemingly permanent state of war. In Israel itself the term "Comprehensive Middle East Peace Settlement" has come to represent a quest almost as elusive as the search for the mythical Fountain of Youth. Two borders away Iraqis are on the brink of civil war. As far as the eye can see, conflict, strife, disagreement and political turmoil seem to reign. These are external symptoms of an internal sickness, a struggle that has no human cure.

History has shown us that people find it hard to engineer meaningful reconciliation with their foes. It is difficult to reconcile sworn enemies with vested interests in keeping a distance from one another. Often the only mediation strategy is to work for a truce, with armed third party troops parked in between, to prevent the violence reigniting.

It takes the decisions of two people to effect true reconciliation. I have been reminded of this time and time again in marriage counseling situations. One party wants to get back together; the other is determined to wallow in self-pity, smouldering anger, resentments and bitterness that keep the relationship in a state of brokenness. Each side feels justified. Common ground seems unattainable because of razor wire.

God takes the initiative

The Gospel is a message of reconciliation. The Bible says that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19), not holding our past against us but offering forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. . If sin causes separation, the grace of God brings us back to Him. As the Christmas carol reminds us, "God and sinners reconciled". Brought back together. If sin has separated us, Christ can provide the bridge of friendship, the way back.

It took a long time and a lot of patience on God's part. The day Adam fell, a redeemer was promised. Prophets, supernatural events, inspired messages anointed leaders, judges, a godly king, all became instruments in his hand to reach out to mankind. Only the coming of Jesus finally broke through the fog. The night he was born the angels sang (probably with a sense of relief), "Peace with God and good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

If it is to work in our lives, Christianity must be relevant and unambiguous. Religious wars, with a "Christian" flavour send all the wrong messages. When the American President referred to the "war against terror" as a "crusade" he opened up old wounds and accusations. If religion is a cause of war, those who pursue peace in its name will be rejected outright, for good reason. How can a cause of division and hatred be the basis for a new world order.

In 1996 and 1997, Christians from around the world organized a Reconciliation March from various European cities to Istanbul, Turkey, to seek closer relationships with Muslims for whom atrocities committed in the name of Christ during the Crusades are a perpetual stumbling-block to receiving the Gospel. The march, and those who participated in it, received good coverage in the communities that needed to hear it most. However, some people remained skeptical. An Armenian priest told me he did not meet those who undertook the march because they did not belong to his denomination. How sad. Reconciliation is a message that needs to be proclaimed by Christians to a fallen human race.

Starting over

Christian faith is relational. When we become Christians, God becomes our heavenly father and other believers stand in relation to us as brothers and sisters in the family of God. There is no power to bring people together like the power of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who surrender to the Lordship of Christ. It is so simple. When we know peace with God, we can take steps to be reconciled with others. "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Sometimes we need the help and counsel of Christian friends and spiritual leaders, but it is possible to start over.

The miracles of peace with God, inner peace and restored relationships make the Christian message eminently relevant in our world. Paul explains that, having been reconciled to God, we receive a "ministry of reconciliation", calling people back to God, on his behalf. Just as an Ambassador represents his or her country and government in dealing with other states, the Christian becomes God's representative in appealing to friends, neighbours and family to come back to Him (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). He can reconcile tensions arising from racial differences, long-standing social feuds, marital acrimony, parent-child conflicts, neighbourhood disputes and any other interpersonal fissures.

When Christians love, God's way, he injects the power necessary to make a difference in our relationships, even the most intractable ones. Nothing is too hard for God.