

Now, may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you were here on Sunday, you'll know that you've done two things tonight that Episcopalians don't normally do. Firstly, you have come to a service between Palm Sunday and Easter day. Secondly, you've come and sat at the front. Fantastic. I'm grateful for the person who inspired this evening's service. It's a new service. It came out of a sermon I preached a few weeks ago on this subject of reconciliation with the readings that we've just heard. So if the last third of the sermon is familiar to you, you've got a very good memory, and that's because I've preached it a few weeks ago.

I wanted to revisit the theme because I've found that every Easter season, there's always a scene that comes out fresh, that comes across strongly in this story that we come and remember and celebrate each year. This year for me, the theme has been reconciliation. I want to offer a few thoughts on that which is a very rich theme. It's come up in various contexts: as I say, the sermon I preached, the adult forums between the services on a Sunday, and also in our Christian formation course. In each of those aspects of church life in recent months, the theme of reconciliation has come up.

It seems to be that this year, for me, reconciliation is the theme. In the formation classes, we were looking at the cross of Jesus and how it is that the cross of Jesus saves us today. We looked at the various models that there are in the New Testament for understanding how that happened. What was going on on the cross? What they're doing is helping us to understand what Jesus won for us on our behalf on the cross. They're all images, metaphors, trying to explain that wonderful mystery. What they all have at their heart is that however we're to understand how Jesus did this for us, what he achieved was to bring about reconciliation between us and God. That whatever happened that Good Friday, however we're to understand it, the effect of it was that we were able to come into right relationship with God, that where there had been distance, even enmity, that Jesus has won for us our reconciliation, forgiveness. We can come before God and be reconciled to him.

Notice that in that reading, and this was a point that came across in several of our sessions, that it's us who are reconciled to God, that what happened on the cross was that Jesus reconciled us to God. Too often, and even in the group, we realized that some of us were laboring under the misapprehension that it was God

that was reconciled on the cross. It's easy to understand where that idea comes from, because there is in the New Testament that language of sacrifice, which we can easily associate with the Aztecs. You know, those primitive people who used to offer human sacrifices to placate an angry god. Sometimes you can even hear versions of Christianity which get close to that, and misappropriating language in the New Testament, to make it sound as if God was angry and would only be satisfied if somehow Jesus was offered to him to placate him.

That's a long way from the thrust of the New Testament and the main point of which is that it's us that are reconciled to God, that God didn't need to be reconciled to us. It was us who needed to be reconciled to him, and that is what Jesus has won on our behalf. There's a story, and I couldn't find it in my files, but I think it's about a gangster in Hong Kong. It's about this man who in his late teens went off the rails, and left his family and went to the city in Hong Kong, and joined a gang, and got caught up in the life of drugs and excess, and actually became a bit of a gang leader and a dealer. Over the years, he forgot about his family and he had no contact with them. But then, there was some sort of feud amongst the gangs, and he found that he needed to get out of town quick. He needed a safe house. He didn't know where to go.

He thought, "Well the only place where no one will think of looking for me is my home." He wrote a quick letter home, and he said, "Dear parents, I don't know if you're still there, or even if you're still alive, but this is your son. I need somewhere safe to go to escape. And I could quite understand after these years if you don't want me back, if you'd rather not see me again. So to save the embarrassment, I'm coming on the train. So just tie a ribbon around the tree at the end of the garden, and I'll see it from the train. Tie a ribbon if you're happy for me to come and stay with you. And it's perfectly fine if you don't put a ribbon up. I'll just know to go and find somewhere else."

He did that, and of course he didn't hear anything back because they didn't know where he was. So he comes in on the train, and he gets close to the village, and he looks out of the window, and he sees the tree at the bottom of his garden, and it doesn't have a ribbon on. It doesn't have a single ribbon on. It's completely bedecked with ribbons all over the tree. He knew then that not just that his parents wanted to see him, but it was a sign of their overflowing, abundant love for him, which had never gone away. Of course, you know there are parables in the Bible which depict God in similar

ways. One thinks of the parable of the prodigal son, of the father waiting to see if the son would come home. That's the image behind reconciliation in the Bible, that God is longing for us to return to him. It's not him who is angry, it's not him who'd ever gone away. It's up to us to return to the Father who is waiting to welcome us home.

Because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we have a way back to God. He has opened up for us a path to return. He's won our freedom and forgiveness, the burden of sin has been lifted. The barrier sin created between us and God has been removed. We can be reconciled to God.

There's several things in tonight's service that are running through what I'm saying, and in the rest of the service. There's one that I've just mentioned that might be the one that you need to stay with, which is that we have been forgiven, that that message of being reconciled to God is a major thing. It's something we each need to appropriate for ourselves. There's a deep truth there that needs to percolate deep inside of us, that we have been reconciled to a God who loves us.

We mustn't be like the Filipino Catholic priest who'd had a very successful ministry in a church. He was a well-loved priest. But he carried around with him a sin, or the secret of a sin, that he'd done many years before, which he just couldn't let go of. It was something he thought was beyond the pale and marred his ministry. Although he never mentioned it to anybody, it meant he could never find the peace that he preached about and wanted so badly. There was a woman in his church who had visions, and he didn't really like her. He was a bit suspicious of her. She'd pester him and asked to pray for him and things, and he'd always brush her aside. One day, he got annoyed with her and he said, "Okay, if you have visions, ask God for a vision. Ask God to tell you the sin I committed when I was in seminary."

He saw her later in the week, and he said to her, "Did you ask God about the sin I committed?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Did you get an answer?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Well, what did God say?" She said, "He said, 'I don't remember.'" We all need to be reminded of that, of God's grace and forgiveness, that God's forgiveness of us is complete, and sometimes it's us who put the burden on ourselves of guilt. That theme of experiencing the depth and profundity of God's forgiveness is a theme that we can contemplate.

Of course, those of us who have been forgiven need to practice forgiveness. We said that every week in the

Lord's prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," which mirrors what Saint Paul says in our reading. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us a ministry of reconciliation."

I've had a growing conviction in recent months that we here at Saint James, and actually the whole church, needs to take this ministry of reconciliation seriously. As it would seem to me, and forgive me, I'm an outsider, but it would seem to me that American society, and everybody says this, is becoming increasingly polarized and divided. We see that starting right at the top, in government, in the way that bipartisan cooperation in Congress seems to be fading away. We've seen that with the appointment of a new Supreme Court judge this week. That's reflected all through our nation. Societies never thrive when people retreat into ghettos and sects, and that's S-E-C-T-S. It's very easy for us to only mix what in England we call PLUs. Do you have PLUs over here?

People like us.

People like us, yes. That's especially true, I think, in America, and in Southern California. I was very struck at the Christmas parade outside here, which obviously happened just before Christmas. I watched the marching bands go past. I watched an all-white marching band go past. Then, an all-black marching band went past. Then, an all Hispanic marching band went. 100% each of them. I'll make no comment on that, just an observation. But the church is an institution which should and can include all people, whatever background or political allegiance. That's what's come across to me in recent months is that we need to make sure and work hard that that is indeed the case, that that's true for us here at Saint James.

We in the whole church are called to model inclusivity. We're not to be like the world. We are not a club of like-minded people. We are bound together by something much deeper than class, or color, or political affiliation. We are Christ's body. We are the people for whom he died. Together, we share his resurrection life. We have a ministry of reconciliation, which means that we're called to break down any barriers that might divide us. That's why I'm delighted that we've identified as one of our priorities for this year to work on outreach. It's important that we develop our links with the poor, the homeless, the refugee. Not simply because it's good to serve other people, which of course it is, but it's important for us as a community to be united, to share our lives with those who are very different to us.

I want to end by returning to the sermon I preached a few weeks ago on the gospel that we heard from Saint Matthew. It's an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus radicalized the Old Testament law by quoting the 10 commandments, but then adding, "But I say to you." And each time he said, "But I say to you," he ramped up how the difficulty ... The degree of difficulty in keeping the commandment went up exponentially. If we're to live as Jesus suggests, it's not enough, as the excerpt we heard, to resist murdering each other. The Old Testament says, "Thou shalt not murder." But if we're to really fulfill what Jesus is saying, it's not enough that we simply refrain from murdering each other.

Jesus raises the bar so much higher. He says we need to be reconciled with those with whom we've been angry or disagreed. In that gospel, he says, "When you come to give your gift at the altar, if you need to be reconciled to someone, go first and be reconciled." That practice of reconciliation is of more importance than one's religious observance. You leave the gift at the altar in order to go and be reconciled. Those of you who've been around Saint James for some time will know that Saint James has had a bit of a history of rather tempestuous encounters, which was delicately described in the job specification I read before I came to Saint James. It was describe thus as a sometime lack of civility.

I'm very pleased to say that that has not been my experience of Saint James. I have not found it to be an angry or hostile place. But that's not enough. Our goal isn't just to find a way of being civil with one another, or managing to avoid those who annoy us. We're to aim at reconciliation. To be reconciled with someone is to have that difficult conversation which begins with acknowledging that there's a problem, that hurt is being caused, and then moving forward together. I want to encourage us as individuals, and also as a church community, to have those difficult conversations, which actually, in my experience, are never as difficult ... They're always more difficult in one's imaginings.

Once you start the conversation, it's never as difficult as you thought it was going to be. That's my experience. There will always be disagreements in a church community. The early church had them. Saint Paul's always talking about what he called, "Jealousy and quarreling." But let's ensure that as well as the inevitable disagreements that we have reconciliation too. Let's aim high in our relationships with one another. I mean, this isn't quite so true as when I first gave the sermon, but just so happened when I first gave this sermon, I'd had in the previous fortnight, I mean,

half a dozen people had come to me and I'd counseled them to go and tell the person who'd upset them how they felt.

Some of the things that people were bringing to me were like 20 years, 15, 20 years past. But I encouraged them to go to the person who'd caused the upset, to be open and vulnerable. Of course that's risky, but that's a characteristic of the life that we're called to live. We who have been reconciled to God need to be reconciled to each other.

There's some thoughts on reconciliation. It's a big topic. I could preach another sermon longer, with all different material, because it's a huge and important thing. As I said, there are various strands running through this theme. I invite you to consider, in the silence which we're about to share, which strand relates to you most. It might have to do with the accepting of God's forgiveness, of enjoying being reconciled to the God who longs to be with us. It might involve a realization of the need to forgive someone else, to let go of a deep hurt and resentment which we might have carried for years. It might be that we're called to initiate reconciliation. We might feel called to make the first move, to initiate what we think might be a difficult conversation.