



# Sermon on Reconciliation

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## Theme

Reconciliation is a courageous choice to build a strong relationship despite recognising significant differences between the parties in the relationship.

## Readings

Genesis 4:1-16; Psalm 133; 1 John 3:11-18; John 13:34-35

### Genesis 4:1-16

- We do not know why Abel's sacrifice was acceptable, but Cain's was not. The text does not tell us why an animal sacrifice was preferred, when an offering of fruit and vegetables was rejected.
- Remember that the Levitical laws do make provision for offerings of grain for example for those who cannot afford to offer pigeons or larger animals.
- This suggests that as with most of the stories in Genesis chapters 1 to 11, the primary point of discussion is whether human beings will submit to God's will, or whether they will rebel. This lies behind the dialogue between God and Cain in verses six to seven.
- Cain's response in verse 9, with his question "Am I my brother's keeper?" is, in Cain's mind at least, answered with a resounding no. But God's perspective is that yes Cain is his brother's keeper.
- The application for us today is that duty of care extends beyond the boundaries of a nuclear family. At this point in the narrative Cain and Abel represent humanity, and so we must take from this passage a suggestion that we are responsible for the welfare of all human beings. This has obvious implications for our duty to pursue reconciliation.

### Psalm 133

- A short psalm, one of the songs of ascent, sung by pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem.
- This song extols the virtues of unity, the blessing and goodness that flows when people are united in common cause and common purpose. Although it is not explicitly stated there is no reason why this unity must be within a group that see the world in the same way.
- This psalm was cited by the Council of Christians and Jews as part of their 75th anniversary celebrations. The relationship between Christians and Jews has been very fraught down the centuries, not least with the pogroms initiated by Christians, which resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent Jewish people.
- Whilst we cannot deny this history and must face up to its implications for relationships between Christians and Jews today, there is no reason why we cannot also seek unity and common cause,

working together for example to feed the hungry, provide shelter for the homeless, care for the environment and right the structural wrongs that damage and scar our society.

## 1 John 3:11-18

- The passage from John's first letter presumes knowledge of the story of Cain and Abel. He believes that those he is writing to are at risk of following Cain's example, hating their fellow believers, rather than loving them sacrificially.
- He also expects followers of Jesus to experience hostility by those outside of the church and warns them to not respond in kind. Rather they are to recognise that they as Christians are people who have already passed through death to eternal life.
- Recognising that your fellow believers are eternal beings impact how you treat them. CS Lewis illustrates this with the suggestion that the person you stand next to in the bus queue is somebody with whom you might spend eternity. Recognising this truth will impact how you think of and treat them.
- John also builds on Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount, arguing that hatred is equivalent to murder and that if we are consumed by hatred, which is murder, we will not inherit eternal life.
- Rather we must imitate the actions of Christ who loved those who scorned and rejected him, loving them to the point of offering his own life as a ransom for many.
- We may be called to make this great sacrifice, or we may be called to make smaller sacrifices, of giving away our possessions, or spending our money on the poor rather than on ourselves.
- Ultimately any Christian belief in reconciliation and love for others must be demonstrated in our actions, not merely in fine words.

## John 13:34-35

- Our short gospel reading is part of Jesus' so-called "Farewell Discourse," that is, the conversation he has with his disciples the night before he dies.
- In chapter 13 he demonstrates his love and enacts a parable of his death on the cross, by washing everybody's feet. This is his act of service for those who are below him in status.
- Jesus' actions have obvious implications for reconciliation, meaning that those with greater power and security should be the ones to make the first move. Those who are more vulnerable will understandably be more reluctant to move.
- Jesus is clear that our love for each other must be modelled on his love for us. There is an expectation of practical action, of the world looking at Christians and saying isn't it amazing how they should love for each other even when they disagree?
- The sad truth is that Christians are often known for their disagreement and hatred of one another, rather than for their sacrificial love for each other.
- Reconciliation is not simply a gospel imperative for maintaining close relationships between believers, it is also the way we proclaim our faith in the risen Lord Jesus to the world.

## The St Philip's Centre's strapline and values

- The Saint Philip's Centre's strap line is "**learning to live well together.**" Learning is a continual process. We never fully master how to live with those who see the world very differently from ourselves. But

through practice, through getting it wrong and being corrected, we can get better at this vital task of sharing the world with those who see the world differently from us.

- The Centre's four values shape all the work that we do. The first is **encounter between people who see the world differently**. It is very easy for us to just to spend time with people who see the world like us. This is an understandable instinct as it is much more comfortable and reassuring to have our own worldviews validated. Yet to live healthily we also need to meet people who see the world differently, to test our assumptions and prejudices and when necessary to change them.
- The second value is **understanding**. We never expect people to agree with each other. In fact, if they agree on everything, they probably have not delved deeply into how they see the world. The point is not to agree, but simply to understand other perspectives. To recognise there are different ways of seeing the world, and that perhaps those differences will educate us and help us develop greater security in our own worldview.
- At the Centre, we encourage people to build **relationships of trust**. We do not want mere arm's length tolerance, where we grudgingly allow someone else the right to exist. Nor do we simply want respect, which says you have your way, I have mine, but let us keep apart. Rather we encourage people to trust each other, that is to commit to sharing deeply of who they are and how they see the world, because it is only through building a relationship of trust that we can truly share space.
- The fourth value is **cooperate**. Once we have understood people, once we have recognised and discussed our differences, we can find areas of common concern and cooperate for the good of all.

## Closing Thoughts

- Reconciliation is a process, more of a journey than a destination.
- Reconciliation is a choice, a commitment, a witness to the transforming power of Christ.