

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023; Trinity 14, Benefice HC,  
Oswaldkirk

Our readings today present us with some ‘r’ words to think about, redemption, relationship, repentance, responsibility, reconciliation, and restoration, which in themselves can offer hours of another ‘r’ word, ‘reflection’! Today I would just like to focus particularly on three of them, relationship, reconciliation, and restoration. All of which weave into one another.

It was a humbling privilege for me when working as a chaplain and now in my pastoral work as your priest, to enter into a relationship with a person and their families and offer comfort especially through end-of-life ministry. In many cases, initially the patient was not particularly receptive to spiritual support but often moved a long way to where they needed to find reconciliation within themselves, their sense of guilt for the past, their present condition and diagnosis, their anxiety regarding where they were going and who they were leaving behind. A trusting relationship and a means of reconciliation were the key factors at this time which was hopefully followed by a sense of peace and restoration of meaning, value, and hope.

The cause of people feeling the need for reconciliation is conflict, within themselves, their relationships, and their situations or with the world. Our Gospel reading today speaks of conflict within the church community. If there is one thing, we can be sure of in the era of rapid social changes that affect church life, it is that conflicts will arise. The question is: how will we deal with it? Here Jesus speaks about the matter with an assurance: “When two are

three are gathered in my name, “I am there in the midst of them”, even in times of apparent conflict.

But, church leaders know that even the finest preachers can't just “preach away” a conflict. They can certainly set up a theological framework for difficult conversations, but at some point, preachers must step out of the pulpit and assume a pastoral role. That's what Matthew outlines here for his congregation and for us. This must take place because when conflict goes unaddressed, and lip service only is paid to the issue and hollow insincere messages said about ‘praying’ for something without love, hearts begin to harden and the experience of being the Body of Christ fades into memory. When it is addressed but done as if the church is only a collection of individuals and nothing else, then a pastoral ministry can end in bitterness, relationships are broken, and “alleluia” gets stuck in the throats of those that are left, when worship becomes hollow and meaningless, and the conflict continues. One of the dominant themes in all these situations is “loss”; of faith in institutions, loss of national pride and international prestige, loss even of some common understanding of “truth” and on a personal level loss of trust in our fellows and ultimately loss of faith in a loving God.

But, when we do address conflict believing that we are not simply an “institutional church” but a place where “two or three can gather together” in the presence of Christ, we are freed to be what we were created to be, God's agents of reconciliation. Consider the immense need in our culture for communities where simple virtues are practiced, there is respect for the dignity of everyone, humble servant leadership, a desire to understanding racial and cultural

differences, with mutual respect and acceptance, rather than fear, where there is a taking responsibility for wrongdoing and offering and accepting forgiveness, and where there is a passionate will to empathize with the pain and isolation of another. We've lost much of this, because in our society we've forgotten how to deal with conflict and do our best to ignore it. The key to this is communication; open, honest and with a willingness to accept that we might be wrong - something so simple but so difficult. Because sometimes that means being broken as an individual or a community, broken together but with Jesus promising to be present bringing the assurance we will last forever because those of us who are bound together as the Body of Christ serve a God whose will is that no one should be lost and in service to our God, in the name of Christ, we become agents of reconciliation to each other, to our neighbours, and to the world that God loves.

We often approach the Gospel today as describing a means of retribution rather than of genuine reconciliation. What Jesus is speaking about here is not so much a pathway to punishment but to reconciliation. This passage is not just about saying our prayers, it is about demonstrating God's love in the church to allow people to turn from sin, back towards God and one another, to heal all kinds of wounds, those we have inflicted and those which have caused us to inflict on others, all made possible because of Jesus Christ being with us if we genuinely ask him to be.

This is because, humanity, when seen through the eyes of Jesus, looks different to God our Father because God no longer sees us as standing in His debt, owing Him what we can never repay. When God looks at us now, He sees His Son, Jesus, and God has seen on Good Friday and Easter

Sunday that mankind's sins have been paid for, the debt cancelled, and the grave made empty, reconciling humanity to Him; made right, brought home, welcomed into the family, loved by Him. That then becomes the means for us to see one another, then we can show this to the world, by our example of a loving community, and invite all who are on the other side of God's fence, or who think they are, to be reconciled to Him, recover relationship with Him and be restored in His image.

I will leave the last word to the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu who, with others, demonstrated at a national level the power of God's power in healing relationships, reconciliation, and restoration.

*"In our own ways, we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt others. Reconciliation is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again."*

Thanks be to God. Amen.