

Reconciliation

The London meeting of the Association of Interchurch Families is held annually at Heythrop College, a Jesuit-run college of the University of London. Several times since the death of Fr John Coventry SJ, co-chair of AIF from its foundation in 1968 until his death in 1998, Fr Robert Murray SJ has celebrated mass for the Association, either at Heythrop or at the annual weekend conference. Some of his homilies have appeared in the Interchurch Families journal ([7,2 Summer 99, pp.2-3](#); [9,2 Summer 2001, p.2](#); [11,1 January 2003, pp.14-15](#)). This is the homily he preached at Heythrop on 26 February 2005 - a day given to sharing memories of Martin Reardon.

Introduction

Once again it falls to me, to my great happiness, to celebrate the AIF's family Eucharist for you. This is the sixth time I have done so since John Coventry could no longer lead your worship on earth. This year his co-founder, our beloved Martin, has joined him in that unseen choir of the Church Triumphant; only our third co-founder, Ruth, is visibly with us. As we lift up our hearts to the Lord, may we all sense the presence of John and Martin among us in spirit. We thank God for inspiring them and Ruth to encourage and develop our association as disciples of Jesus, united in faith and love although still suffering the tensions of separated denominations.

Because of that sad fact, I still have to make the statement that I have made each year. I often pray that regular sharing in Roman Catholic communion may be granted at least for interchurch families; but until that day comes, my representative position forbids me to utter a general invitation to other Christians to receive Holy Communion at this mass. For my part, however, I believe there is a higher call for me to welcome sincerely all Christians whose love for our Lord draws them to approach this altar. So I ask you as mature Christians to follow your own spiritual discernment, remembering the two sacraments of Christian life which unite you in Christ. Of course you are free and welcome to come just for a blessing for yourselves and your children (or, if you prefer, simply not to come). But in these circumstances, from my heart I would want the blessing I invoke, in the close presence of the Sacrament, to express nothing less than a prayer that spiritually it may be for you a sharing in the fullness of communion.

May this Eucharist be a service of thanksgiving for Martin's life and work. What New Testament theme best sums up that work? I discussed this with Ruth the other day, and we quickly agreed that it is '*reconciliation*', a theme especially dear to St Paul. Was it not for their work for the reconciliation of the churches that Martin and Ruth received their awards of honour from both Canterbury and Rome? And is it not the whole basis on which your Association is founded, that an interchurch family is a core of reconciliation already realised, and an anticipation of full reconciliation of the churches to which you are faithful? In this shared faith let us offer our worship.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

After my opening words on *reconciliation* as the theme of this commemoration of Martin Reardon's life of service, I'm sure you were expecting a reading from St Paul.

The passage we have heard was to the Corinthian church, a community in grave need of reconciliation – both mutual between groups in their church, and in their whole relationship with God. But what Gospel passage were you expecting? It may surprise you, but the word ‘reconciliation’ never occurs in the four gospels, either spoken by Jesus or by anyone else. Yet Jesus *taught* it, both in act and in word. *In act*, when he extended his works of mercy to people whom his Jewish critics regarded as beyond the pale – ‘sinners’ in Israel, Samaritans, non-Jews and even those who were nailing him to the cross. *In word*: both by short sayings like his blessing on the Peacemakers, and by examples in his parables. In that of the Good Samaritan, for example, there is a challenge to think anew about those hated neighbours, which could be the beginning of reconciliation.

The Prodigal Son

But were you surprised at my choosing the story of the Prodigal Son? Well, I did not choose it directly. It is actually in the lectionary for today, but I was on the point of replacing it by another passage (as in fact I have done for the first lesson), because it is almost distractingly rich in lessons for all of us, and I wanted to concentrate on Paul’s teaching, to apply it to the special place of interchurch families with respect to reconciliation of the separated traditions they represent.

Yet there are key elements in the parable which really are about reconciliation. The *father* presents a supremely moving image of God’s unfailing and unconditional mercy, as he runs forward to forgive and reconcile his repentant son, and then as he comes out to plead with his elder son to be reconciled with his brother. The *elder son*’s bitterness can symbolise the inherited weight of hostility of one religious group to another. Jesus did not tell us how the *younger son* felt towards his brother, but if we think what was likely in the circumstances, it must have involved considerable fear; this too is one of the greatest hindrances to reconciliation. But here I will leave this parable to your own reflections, and turn to St Paul.

The Corinthian church

It is clear that, though Paul founded the Christian community in Corinth, it gave him a lot of trouble. There must have been forceful personalities there; the first letter suggests that there is a charismatic in-group whose domination is hurting others. Paul writes a stern call to discipline, though it is with great love and desire for the good of all. In the second letter we can read between the lines the criticisms that have been made against him: ‘he keeps changing his mind’, ‘he is over-sensitive’, ‘he excuses himself too much’. Paul’s reply is powerful, but (as in the first letter), it is in these passages that he rises above personalities and gives some of his greatest pages of theological teaching, totally centred on Christ and his work.

Throughout the letter Paul proves that he believes and trusts that all, even those who have tried to hurt him, have put their faith in Christ, become members of his body and recognise each other as sisters and brothers in him. On this basis he can say ‘the love of Christ controls *us*’, not just ‘me’. The relationship he wants the Corinthian community to understand better is based in Christ’s solidarity with the whole human race, to save which he came to share the nature of this sinful race, subject to death. He made his own death the one supremely efficacious sacrifice of atonement to reconcile all humankind to God, and by God’s power conquered death to make a renewed humanity able, by faith in him, Christ, to live as ‘*a new creation*’. Jesus’ humanity was real, not a beautiful apparition, but our relationship to him as our risen Lord is on

a different level. This process was realised historically only a generation before Paul was writing, but by the ever on-going gift of the Holy Spirit it continues. All this was God's work through his incarnate Son, and so it continues. It is at this point that Paul brings in the words 'reconcile' and 'reconciliation'. Christ's whole mission was to reconcile sinful humankind to God; and he has given this mission to his members, not just in Corinth nineteen centuries ago, but for all time.

The message of reconciliation

'God through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; . . . God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.'

In these verses we must carefully notice who, and how many, Paul refers to as 'we' and 'us'. Clearly he is referring to his own role in bringing his readers to experience anew their reconciliation with God through Christ. But surely, when he speaks of the 'ministry', entrusted with 'the message of reconciliation', 'ambassadors for Christ', he is not claiming that this responsibility is vested only in the original Apostles, and in the letters to the Corinthian church he never refers to presbyters or ministers which he presumably appointed there. No, he is calling all Christians who have experienced the reality of being reconciled with God through Christ to help others to experience the same in their own lives, and so to hand on 'the message of reconciliation'. Paul is speaking *to us*, today and every day, telling us that God is calling us to take up this charge.

Interchurch families

And so finally I come back to you, members of this Association founded by the insight of John, Martin and Ruth. Its character is defined by the fact of Christian couples, coming together from different traditions, often separated long ago, and kept apart by unhealed wounds from the past and by mutual ignorance. You are couples who now want to be joined in Christian marriage, but each partner is so sincerely committed to the tradition through which she and he came to know Christ, that neither is prepared to abdicate to an alien authority what they hold dearest, and in particular, how they should bring up their children. Hardly any of you have not experienced the pain of this situation, and those who want to stand by you share not a little of it, especially if we represent the Church which makes what seem to many the harshest claims and lays the heaviest burdens.

But today I have brought you Paul's words. The estranged traditions from which you come all need to hear, again and again, 'the message of reconciliation', to receive 'the ministry of reconciliation' and to be actually reconciled. Who but you can be the best ministers? You all know that the founding vision for the AIF is that each interchurch family may become a beacon of ecclesial reconciliation achieved, an anticipatory outpost of the City of God 'which is bound firmly together' (Ps 122). When things are hard, may Paul's 'message of reconciliation' strengthen you, and may you all know the joy of ministering it to others.

Robert Murray SJ