

## **Advent 2- God's reconciling love**

Reconciliation is fundamental to the story of God in Christ.

Reconciliation is about bringing together- those that have broken apart in fear, anger, judgment, cruelty, violence, lack of understanding and so on.

Living reconciliation as Christians means living as Christ in the world.

That means living in the space between the hatreds of the world.

That is a very challenging and difficult place to be.

In Advent we practice the remembrance of waiting for Jesus to be born. We recall the Old Testament prophecies that speak of the suffering servant, the sacrificial lamb, the wonderful counsellor who is rejected, despised, hated and condemned.

Jesus, for Christians, is the embodiment of the kingdom of heaven – and of what God looks like. We wait in Advent to reaffirm our faith in that revelation of God's goodness. Considering Jesus was born 2000 years ago, what does it mean then to be a follower of Jesus, today?

Put differently, what are the values of Jesus' kingdom?

In his ministry Jesus brings together those who should be apart:

- Tax collectors – hated and detested
- Samaritans – not pure enough
- Humble fishermen- not important
- Elite Roman women – the wealthy

If you are a robber hanging by him on the cross, a Roman centurion who cares for a slave in his charge, or a bleeding widow with no more funds, he doesn't mind.

Most often we have selective hearing- we hear the parts of the story that fit our pre-conceived ideas, but Jesus worked to break down all sorts of barriers. He gathered the poor and the rich, the holy and the despised: what he cared about was not your position in society or

what you had done, but whether you were ready to engage with him – to open your ears to his message. Unlike John the Baptist who hung about in the wilderness, Jesus came into the town, to engage with the people. He was well-aware of the violence of humanity and the possibility of being caught in its snare – John the Baptist was beheaded, and he was to be crucified by the Roman powers in a particularly cruel and inhumane way.

Of course, we are bombarded with the violence of humanity on our TV screens at the moment.

What is the answer to the violence of the world?

Is there an answer?

How do we deal with the suffering and evil that comes with violent conflict?

In 2020 I went on a pilgrimage to Bosnia-Herzegovina – and Serbia – to learn about the 1992-1995 war and in particular to find out more about the 1995 massacre of 8000 Bosniak men and boys at Srebrenica.

The pilgrimage was part of a leadership course helping clergy to reflect on the impact of violent conflict, to witness to the lasting impact of genocide and to reflect on the meaning of evil in our world. Justin Welby has a keen interest in peace keeping and the ministry of reconciliation – and the conflict in the region was one intricately bound up with identity and nationalism.

As a group we stayed in Sarajevo and visited *The Museum of Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide 1992 – 1995* which had been founded in July 2016 as an initiative to sustain the memory of all the victims of the war that lasted from 1992- 1995. We also travelled to Srebrenica and heard female survivors talk about the 1995 massacre of 8000 boys and men, heard about the failure of the UN peace keeping force to protect the safe zone, that was a terrible part of the history, and also heard from a rare male survivor. We saw the mass graves and

witnessed to the continuing tensions in the region. The geographical area immediately surrounding the memorial was Serbian controlled territory, and the conflict and its wounds were barely under the surface.

As part of the learning experience, a session was led for us by the then Chief of Staff at Lambeth Palace, David Porter, a Baptist from Northern Ireland whose work focused on reconciliation.

We were asked to consider the qualities of **Justice, Truth and Mercy** in relation to the violent conflict, ethnic cleansing and genocide that we had been given first-hand accounts of. The exercise is based loosely on the words we've read together today from psalm 85.

**Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other**

What was most important to us, we were asked, when thinking about reconciliation: justice, truth or mercy? Each of us had to join a team defending our choice and explaining why we had chosen it above the other two. Then, Justice, Mercy and Truth, each represented by one person had to have a debate- arguing why they were the most significant value in relation to armed conflict and genocide.

On our pilgrimage we encountered different people and heard different stories; we travelled the country visiting sites of massacre; we were presented with scientific reports; we considered what the international courts had decided. In all of this we were seeking to find out the truth – and to have a way of finding the truth and talking about it was incredibly important. What surprised me was that even in our relatively small group of mainly English Christians, working for the Church of England, the truth was contested. Everyone's version of the truth was shaded by their own life stories, their own values, their own allegiances. Truth seemed hard to agree on, especially when some voices were conspicuous by their absence. Truth is necessary but also elusive.

We also heard about the search for justice- in particular justice for the victims of genocide. What did justice look like for them and how could it be achieved? One of the main ways that justice was mediated was through the work of international organisations, in particular the work of the scientists working for the International Commission on Missing Persons, in uncovering and identifying the bones of victims, often moved multiple times in an attempt to hide the crimes. We visited a bone sorting factory, an extraordinarily stark but amazingly touching experience, as the finding and categorising of bones was a way to help families name, grieve and honour their loved ones. It was also mediated through the courts at the Hague. But, locally, justice was largely absent, for there was and still is denial and further victimisation of those already victims of war, land grabs, intimidation and cultural exclusion.

Truth and Justice are essential to the peace and reconciliation process - even though they are fought over and contested. Without them there can be no resolution or reconciliation.

What of mercy? I was surprised that I chose to defend mercy and I did so because it seemed to me that mercy was always possible, where truth and justice often weren't. For example, in the museum in Sarajevo one of the victims recorded how one of the guards showed her son mercy - he spared her son death one day after she begged him not to kill him. A poignant and stark moment of pain, deflected just for a moment by one day's mercy. Then, there is the possibility of showing mercy to the perpetrators. Whilst justice is required, and the truth is needed, mercy can turn a heart from suffering and pain to peace. It feels as though mercy has the ability to break down barriers and bring reconciliation. Justice and Truth, though necessary in themselves, don't always bridge the gap of hatred and despair, of guilt and victimhood; is it possible that this belongs to mercy?

We began thinking about reconciliation. About God's purpose being the one who reconciles. The image that is below shows Jesus on the cross. What is different about it, is that Jesus' body is formed from the gap between the 2 sides of the wooden cross.



Jesus, depicted as he is, **as the space between the two sides**, is to me a powerfully poignant image.

Jesus is there in the midst of all of our struggles – seeking to hold people together through suffering love. That is the meaning of sacrifice, suffering in love to bring people together, to forgive.

Jesus, we often hear, takes the side of the victims, and it is true that Jesus stands with victims- yet he does so not to condemn the perpetrators. That's the bit we tend to forget. Jesus comes back to offer peace and forgiveness to those that have wronged him: those that killed him. That's what God's love looks like. When we take sides and condemn, when we seek only truth and justice, we can become distracted from God's ways, which always incorporate mercy.

Mercy is fundamental to the Christian Gospel – to the Christian faith, as is it to Judaism and Islam. God's mercy towards his people – all his

people - is supreme, without it we could not stand in God's sight. Mercy is essential to what it means to be a disciple of Christ as it is God's mercy that sets us free. I know that I could not stand before the throne of God on the day of judgment, facing the truth about myself, and hearing God's justice, if God were not also able and willing to be merciful to me. Mercy changes the dynamic - enabling us to live with our failings, raising us up to see God even though we should not be able to see him and live. Therefore, just as God has been merciful to us, we should be merciful to one another.

There is no quick resolution; peace-keeping and reconciling are a deeply costly way of being in the world. But, I believe that God is in the world as the space between our hatreds, not as the one who condemns, but the one who says 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23.34).