

Yesterday evening I spoke about prayer. At the heart of what I was trying to say was that in the partnership of prayer between each other and God we find our true identities. Identity is, of course, a very complex matter. People find identity in all sorts of complex areas, through relationships above all, but also through status and titles. It's a great danger to find your identity in a particular title that by some weird stroke of providence you may find yourself inhabiting for a while, without being specific [laughter]. Through status and titles, through position, through character and upbringing, ethnic background, nationality, work (many, many people find their identity in work), through your sexuality, through your interests, and for most of us, in an almost impossible to analyse combination of all of the above. But the foundation or the root identity is in Jesus Christ. For those who belong to him, that is the place from which everything else finds its bearings, its direction, its way of interacting.

I've told the story before, and forgive me if you've heard it before, of the week of the Prayer Pilgrimage around a number of cathedrals in the southern part of England just before I was installed here, a little over two years ago. The way in which the pilgrimage was structured was very simple. It was announced that I would be in a given cathedral on a given day, between 10 in the morning and 4 in the afternoon, and anyone was welcome to come and pray with me. We decided in advance that if no one came it didn't matter, because at least God would show up. The pilgrimage was organised by one of my colleagues at Lambeth Palace with the cathedrals and with a group called 24/7 prayer, a global movement of prayer started by someone called Pete Greig some years back. He lives in Guildford and I preached at his church last Sunday week. 24/7 is an extraordinary movement in that it's youth-based, prayer-centred and engages principally with the most un-churched people around. They are well used to organising weeks of prayer, which is why we drew them in. They estimated, with great celebration, that as many as 800 or 900 people would come to the different prayer days in total during the week. The reality, to their surprise, and my astonishment, was nearer 12,000. The last day was at Chichester; it was heaving with people, and I was wandering around dressed, as I am now, in a black cassock and this pectoral cross. You may have noticed that it's quite easy to miss me in a crowd. A man came up to me as I wandered, and said: "I understand the Archbishop of Canterbury is here today." [laughter] I tried to look as modest as possible, although secretly I was rather pleased, and replied: "Oh, yes, he is." He answered: "Is there any chance you could introduce me to him." [laughter] At this point I drew myself up to my full 5ft 8 and a half inches – don't forget the half, when you're my height it matters – and said, with a decent level of modesty, I hope: "Actually, it's me." He looked me up and down, and said: "Oh." And wondered away without another word.

I've been dining out on that for a while now, and it is precisely true. But the point is this: underlying that moment was a question of identity. Who was he expecting to meet? And who did I think I was?

The danger of forming our identity on the temporal and the provisional is enormous, and it overwhelms all of us. Someone said to me recently: "What does it feel like to be Archbishop of Canterbury?" Well, the honest answer is I never 'feel' like the Archbishop of Canterbury, in fact even to ask the question is fairly meaningless as I have no idea of what an Archbishop of Canterbury feels like. Whatever may be the case, we project our understandings of other people's identities onto them, without knowing what it is like to be inside their skin. As we know, we can't get past someone else's face. We can see them, we can face them, we can love them, we can know them. But we can never feel what they are feeling, we can only empathise through our own framework of understanding of life and our own identity. And whatever else that is, it is not their identity.

That is the complexity of identity. But in prayer, as I spoke last night, we grow into a place where the identity that is ours in Christ becomes our root and foundational identity on which everything else is built. In Revelation 2:17 the glorified Christ in His letter to the church of Pergamum says this: "I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it." In other words, Christ will give them people their identity and it is clear that He will do so lavishly and excessively: listen to the theologian and poet Ephrem the Syrian from the 4th century:

The Lord of all

is the treasure store of all things,

upon each according to his capacity

He bestows a glimpse

of the beauty of His hiddenness

of the splendour of his majesty.

He is the radiance who, in His love

makes everyone shine -

the small with flashes of light from Him

the perfect with rays more intense,

but only His child is sufficient

for the might of his glory.<sup>[1]</sup>

The whole process of developing our individual and corporate identity is one that has to be rooted in prayer, in partnership with this luxurious creator of who we are, with Jesus himself.

And identity is something that is both real and latent, potential in all of us. It is real because we are who we are and we exist, and we relate (we always need to go back to the South African expression of 'ubuntu': I am because I am in relationship with others); but it's potential because the foundational, cornerstone identity that we have is the one we have in Christ, and it is always being formed. That is true for every human being, whatever they are like. There are no exceptions. It is not a matter of capacity or incapacity, of colour or ethnicity, of intelligence or ability, of aptitude or disability, of sexuality or character. Our identity is a treasure that is in the purpose of God and exists potentially and actually. Our lives are the forming of that identity.

But what has all this to do with reconciliation? Reconciliation with God through Christ is the process by which we find and grow into our true identities, and through reconciliation we are called to be stewards of the identity of other people.

About fifteen months ago Caroline and I were in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the DRC, in Goma, the far eastern side of it. It was part of the tour of the different provinces of the Anglican Communion, which we've carried out over the last two years, in which we've visited all 37 others. In Goma we met an old friend, a local Anglican clergyman there and going from there I went with him to an IDP camp (Internally Displaced Persons camp). That part of the eastern Congo has been in some kind of conflict or other for the thick end of forty years, and the DRC's casualties are now reckoned to be somewhere between four and five million, directly and indirectly from that war. To put that in perspective, in terms of death that is four times the number of British dead in the Great War. The IDP camp was set on volcanic rock with tents perched on it. For one reason or another that I am not sure I have ever understood food supplies were not coming in, and there was growing alarm about the shortage of food. It was very hot and very dry and the ground was awful. Twenty five thousand people were living in closely packed tents with inadequate sanitation.

At one corner of the camp was a large marquee and I was taken into it. In it a doctor (I think only one, but I may be wrong) was looking after children with varying levels of disability who had become lost or been abandoned by their parents. They lay on the ground or on mattresses, very thin mattresses. I walked around and came across two small children, a brother and sister, one very very little, the sister, a baby, and the other perhaps two or three years old. The baby was lying listlessly on her back, she was obviously unresponsive and had significant disabilities. Her sibling sat near her, watching her. I knelt down next to them and held the little one's hand for a while. I prayed for them and then someone said you've got to move on. Elsewhere in the camp there was an elderly lady who was blind. She was by herself in her tent and I went in. She was weeping helplessly because her family was nowhere around and she didn't know where she was and she was at the end of her life. And I talked to her a for a while – and of course she understood nothing, perhaps a touch.

What war does is to take people's identities and tear them apart. Twist them, break them. It is the opposite of the stewardship of the identity of the other; it is its destruction, its disintegration. It does the exact opposite of what God does for us in Christ. And the same, tragically, is true, to a more or less greater extent within households, or communities. It's true when children or vulnerable adults are abused.

In the church, worst of all when there is disruption and dispute, we cease to treasure the identity that Christ has given to each other, and determine to impose our own understanding of Christian identity on them, or to expel them. One only has to say it to see what a blasphemy it is, what an atrocious kind of behaviour it is, and yet it seems deeply imbued in the Christian spirit. Our sin and our wickedness that leads us all at some point in our lives – us all: I'm not pointing fingers – to varying degrees into this sort of behaviour. It is known as demonising the other, diminishing their identity to the point where it is seen only as darkness, as the absence of God. It's why I'm so passionate about not expelling people. Of course we differ and disagree, of course that leads to argument, to disruption. But when my Director of Reconciliation, David Porter, with a long history in Northern Ireland, and I speak of 'good disagreement' or 'disagreeing well', it's not a cheap way of saying, 'let's pretend we don't have problems'. It's a way of saying, 'identity is precious, not to be twisted and fractured and tortured, because it is God-given.'

And reconciliation comes in two axes. The vertical axis is the relationship with God which forms and creates and settles our true identity that only He knows, and begins the process of us being enabled to discover that identity. The horizontal axis comes from life lived in this world in community, in prayer together, but is much more than that; it extends into every part of our lives and activities, churchy and non-churchy. Reconciliation is the process by which we learn to treasure the identity of the other.

To treasure someone else's identity does not mean to accept all they do, or to agree with them unconditionally. That would be absurd.

Reconciliation is never about unanimity. The vertical axis sets the model for the horizontal axis. In the vertical axis God sees all our faults and our failings, our sins and our wickedness, and yet loving us gives His Son so that we might know God. The love of Christ, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5: 14, in the old translation, "constrains us", in the NRSV "urges us on", into a relationship with God. The love of Christ shapes and makes us. In that reconciliation with God we are rescued from slavery to all the other identities that somehow seek to dominate us, including especially the ones we don't like, the identity that leads me into behaviour that I despise and turn from, and yet turn back to so often. Don't we all have the days when we look back and wince at something we've done? I did it in a meeting the other day, got what the family call vehement, it's a kind way of saying, and I've been kicking myself ever since; although the person I was vehement with didn't mind at all, he comes from the sort of tough school of Christianity and said: "That was a good manly rebuke." Actually, I was being vehement.

But such is the nature of the vertical reconciliation. It takes us with all we are and fail to be. The Reverend Dr Sam Wells, in a lecture at Coventry Cathedral a couple of years back, started by saying: "Reconciliation is the Gospel. [2]"

So reconciliation with God, the vertical axis, is something that is absolutely fundamental and essential to our living as Christians, and to being reconcilers. We first have to be reconciled with God. Paul describes this vividly in a few verses later in 2 Corinthians: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new". [3]"

The importance of this reconciliation is impossible to exaggerate. It is essential because it enables us to be those whom we are called to be, to be fully alive human beings. We all know the words of St Irenaeus, inscribed on Archbishop Ramsey's memorial here in this cathedral: "The Glory of God is the living man; And the life of man is the vision of God." That completeness of life is true not only for the individual but also for God's people taken together. We are only truly a community as the church when we are a community alive in Christ. And we are only truly a community alive in Christ when we are reconciled to Christ and thus to each other, and are reflecting the reconciling character of God in being reconcilers, each of us. Reconciled reconcilers.

In this vertical axis we see the true cost of reconciliation; for it to bring life it costs even the life of the Son of God, and when we speak of reconciliation it must never be cheap, a sort of subfusc getting on with each other. Being nice. I always say, self-depreciatingly with appropriate modesty, I don't really do nice. I've been slightly dismayed recently when someone said to me: "Yes, I noticed that." [laughter]

Reconciliation with others costs us what it cost God to be reconciled with us, which is everything.

But the vertical axis of reconciliation is not so much an axis as a fire hose. God pours reconciliation into us in enormous flooding volumes, and into His church with such force and such overwhelming generosity that it is impossible for us to contain it within ourselves. Therefore the nature of God's people, the church, should be, as a key sign of them being truly alive in Christ, that they are reconcilers in the world around. We should spray peace and reconciliation everywhere we live.

The horizontal axis of reconciliation is the one in which we begin the process of caring for and stewarding and guarding the identity of others. When you see it at work it is extraordinary. The tent near Goma of which I was speaking was operated by a Christian charity supported by Tearfund, called Hope Africa. The money originated with DfID, the Department for International Development, the UK development department, and comes out of the 0.7 per cent of taxes, of government income, of GDP – not even government income but GDP – that goes in international development. I think it's worth it. Amidst the trauma of that war, this charity has sought to value and guard the identities, to the extent they could, overwhelmed by the numbers, of those in the tent and in the camp.

Reconciliation overflows and operates at the most local and at the most global levels. At the very local, last year the Dover Foodbank last year demonstrated a reconciliation in which people were reconciled to their intrinsic value through being given, as one man said, who had come into the food bank with his eyes down, so ashamed was he to need to be there, and went out saying: "This is not a box of food, it's a box of love."

In many schools, such as the Church of England secondary school in South London I was at three weeks ago, we see the leadership of the school bringing people together from incredible diversity into a commonality of view, based around clear Christian values and worship, albeit many of the children were from other faith backgrounds. Christianity was not imposed, but the structure of Christian faith enabled those there to find their identities treasured and the opportunity to grow permitted. I did an assembly on reconciliation, and then spent forty-five minutes with a group of students of all secondary school ages, fifteen of them or so, while they posed questions and made comments. They were unbelievably articulate, thoughtful and considerate of each other's views, despite the most foundational differences. They were transparently honest about the differences, yet they managed to indicate a respect for each other and a value for each other. I came away buzzing, having seen Christ at work through the leadership and the example and the structure put in place by the teachers there. Identities treasured.

But how do we let reconciliation overflow? I shall end with six words – and several paragraphs attached to each word, I'm afraid to say – all beginning with 'R' which speak of a pattern of developing reconciliation. And we see all these 'Rs' above all in the life of Jesus during Holy Week.

The first one is **researching**, getting to know. The nature of God is to know us and to know who we are, to understand everything about us to our deepest level, including the things we have no idea about ourselves. Yet with all that, it is not enough. He takes human form and lives with us knowing every temptation, tempted as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews "in every way as we are and yet without sin".<sup>[4]</sup> What is the purpose of the incarnation, or a purpose of the incarnation? It is to be like us, so that we can find our identity in Him and become like Him. The identification with humanity is completed in facing betrayal and loss, torture and death. Reconciliation on the horizontal axis begins with the process of researching, of sitting alongside, of being incarnational, of experiencing what the other experiences, or if you are the person seeking to bring reconciliation, what both sides are experiencing, of living in the reality of their dispute, yet 'without sin'. It is not to seek to be objective, not merely to empathise, but to feel at the deepest level, it is to know within oneself the agony of their separation and hatred or dislike or disruption, which is damaging their identities. It is costly. The first part of any reconciliation action is to know that we don't know. I first went to Nigeria in December 1978 and from then for the next couple of years, or a bit longer, went more or less once a month, when I was in the oil industry. By mid-1980, I pretty well understood the country. Since 2002, I've also gone quite regularly, and after however many years it is, 37 years or something, I know that I don't understand anything about it. The move from unconscious ignorance to conscious ignorance is the first step for the human being in reconciliation. For Jesus that did not exist, thankfully, but for us it does. In the incarnation we see His knowledge lived out in experience, and that calls us to seek knowledge through living in experience with those caught up in conflict, whether in a family or a community, a church or a country.

The second 'R' is **relationship**. John 13 verse 1: Jesus knowing who He was and where He had come from, and having loved His disciples "loved them to the end". There are lots of key words in that verse, but love is a pretty good one. That love to the end, to the end of his life, to the limits of love, the end of love, sets the standard of relationships in reconciliation.

Canon Andrew White, the 'Vicar of Baghdad', is an extraordinary man with whom I worked for two years when I was at Coventry. I think that most extraordinary part about him is his capacity to love. That capacity to love, the genuineness of that love for those with whom he deals, means he is able to build relationships with people at a very deep level indeed, very quickly indeed. Bitter enemies find that both sides are loved by him and thus, a bridge begins to build, built of love, a living bridge which is the reconciler (although remember that the nature of bridges is that they get walked all over, that is the cost of reconciliation). The building of genuine relationships which exist for themselves, and not in some manipulative way for the greater good (that dangerous phrase), is core to reconciliation. It is the way God works with us. Romans 5:8: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." It is the nature of building our identities that we exist in relationship with Christ while yet being sinners. His love overcomes the sin. In the relationship with enemies there will thus always be pain and cost, of our sin and failings as reconcilers, cost for the parties themselves.

Research, relationship, **relief**. During Holy Week, especially at the Last Supper, we see Jesus recognises the needs of His disciples and he meets those needs. He washes their feet to meet the need of their pride being set aside. He gives a memorial to meet the need of them knowing that He is always with them. He teaches them, to meet the need of them understanding what is about to happen. In every conflict there is need at a deep level of identity; there's part of the identity that has a gap, a hole, a crack, a need for healing, and which needs filling for reconciliation to happen. Even the wealthiest and most successful have some kinds of needs. Reconciliation involves the essential aspect of meeting need, but to know it we have to have built relationships and done our research. Relieving need is the clearest evidence of true love. Relief does not buy relationship, it demonstrates it.

Fourthly, we take **risks**. Jesus took the greatest risk of all, surrendering Himself to those who would torture and then kill Him, trusting that God would raise Him up and that our salvation would be achieved.

All reconciliation involves taking profound risk. There is an obvious risk to being in areas of conflict, but the greater risk is the risk for us and for the parties in dispute in bringing together people who hate each other. Even to be involved in domestic disputes or community quarrels involves risk, the risk of being the bridge that is hated by those who do not wish to cross it. It takes a long time to get to the point where they will meet. Yet, with those risks is the opportunity for the respect and treasuring of identity.

In 2004 I was on one of a number of visits to Burundi, towards the end of the civil war, for a meeting of rebel and government leaders, both civil and military, which I was facilitating. It was three days of working on reconciliation, after a war that had killed seven per cent of the population. It was hard and grinding conversations, all in French. On the last day a member of one side stood, a senior officer, pointed across the room and said, pointing at someone: "That man killed 30,000 people through his militia, how can we ever be reconciled?" (I should say I don't know if he was telling the truth, but it was his perspective at that moment). That comment set out the cost of reconciliation for those in conflict. It is the forgiveness of sin, the decision to move forward and see the price as paid. And the result is that reconciliation is so costly that it is very, very rare. You may have peace, but not often reconciliation. I'll come back to that in a moment.



Fifthly, is **reconciliation** itself. Research, relationship, relief, risk, reconciliation. It's a fragile plant in the cold climate of human identity. It has to be nurtured and protected, guarded and respected, and it's a slow grower. As someone once said to us, about a different subject: "Weeds spring up overnight; oak trees take centuries." Reconciliation is an oak, but not as strong. A good rule of thumb is that a week of conflict gives you a year of work on reconciliation. Try applying that to the Middle East, or to Northern Ireland. Each act of nurturing reconciliation costs us our own pride, our own pride in our own identity as we are shaped into being reconciled reconcilers. Each step forward involves a surrender of self.

The greatest reconciliation in human history is that of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. During that period people who had killed millions of each other's citizens have learnt to live together and put aside weapons and any thought of war. I remember a French friend of mine, a senior manager at ELF, whose grandfather had been in the Franco-Prussian war, his uncle killed in the Great War, his brother killed in the resistance in the Second World War, in which he'd also fought as a teenager, saying to me: "You British don't understand Europe. It's nothing to do with economics, it's about not killing." And that pointed me to that extraordinary moment of reconciliation, so that nowadays the battle is really only carried out on the football field.

But reconciliation remains a fragile flower, and generations that grow up not remembering the hatreds of the first half of the twentieth century, which sprang from fifteen hundred years of almost continuous war in northern and north-western Europe, may well find that the plant is more fragile than it looks. Look at what happens when we don't nurture reconciliation, because it's a process not an event. Look at what happens in families when there are damaging quarrels that are not properly dealt with. The scars remain and reconciliation grows around and over them, but they are always there. The process lasts a lifetime, whether it's with God or with each other. There is cost to this day in Europe.

And lastly, reconciliation needs **resourcing**. It is something that we need to work at day-by-day but to do that we need to find the resources to do it. Jesus in John's gospel promises His disciples the Holy Spirit who will lead them into all truth, equip them to find the identities that they are called to have. They will not be left comfortless but will be resourced. With each other we need to encourage and resource, never imagine that once some kind of agreement is made that that that is the end. We must tend and nurture reconcilers, and strengthen the reconciled. The cost is endless commitment.

Reconciliation is an extraordinarily complex process because it is a process of nurturing identity into health and away from damage, but at its heart is the simplicity of being good stewards of the identity of the others. That definition applies in every area including the environment where we are called to be good stewards, to be reconciled to the natural world. It applies especially in the agony of human conflict, from the home to the global fields of battle, in which our deep-set tendency to destroy and twist other human beings' identities is to be replaced by the overflowing waters of the love of Christ, in which by being reconciled reconcilers we imitate our own reconciler with God and that we will pay any cost to achieve the goal, that goal of the human being in their own identity, free, reconciled and living to the glory of God.

Amen.

[1] Ephrem the Syrian (4th century theologian in what is now Turkey) Translation St Vladimir Press, by Sebastian Brooke



[2] Faith in Conflict Conference, Coventry, Tuesday 26 February 2013 'The Exasperating Patience of God'

[3] 2 Corinthians 5:17

[4] Hebrews 4:15

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