

Lent IV (C)
Joshua 8.5-15; II Corinthians 5.16-21; Luke 15.11-32
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
18 March 2007

“ON WHOSE SIDE?”

~Paul H. Friesen~

‘Are you one of us,’ asked Joshua—or one of them? It’s an easy question for any of us to ask in moments of stress or fear. After all, Joshua had been standing there, simply thinking, minding the affairs of Israel. He had looked up and there—where no one had stood a minute before—now stood a man with his sword drawn.

Of course Joshua had no idea he stood before the Lord’s messenger. For if Joshua had known, he would have asked no questions at all—as Rabbi Zusya once said to his own disciples: ‘You have never seen an angel, yet, if he stood before you, you would not ask him questions.’¹ In fact, Jewish tradition later identified the Lord’s messenger as the Archangel Michael.² But none of this could have helped Joshua until his eyes were actually opened.

His eyes were opened when the messenger spoke: ‘I’m neither for you nor against you. I’m not here to be useful to you for your agenda. I’ve come from the Lord who made heaven and earth and everything in it.’ Joshua fell on his face, speechless, and worshipped God. So the second question he asked was a question with his eyes wide open, for he knew already what he had to do. Like Moses before the burning bush, Joshua must take off his shoes. Wherever the Lord went, wherever he met his people, there the ground was holy. The Lord’s presence made all human ‘sides’ irrelevant.

We worry so much that people won’t be able to see things from our point of view. We become anxious that our point of view will be overlooked. We often forget that we’re all meant to seek out the Lord’s point of view together, rather than burn our energies in gathering support for ‘our side’. The prophets seemed to never stop reminding the people of this great obligation, though they paid dearly for not always blessing the selfish plans of their kings and queens.

St. Paul felt just as obliged as the prophets to point everyone in an argument to the divine perspective on our lives. When he wrote that quarrelsome, neurotic bunch he called ‘the church of God in Corinth’ he said the same thing.³ ‘From

¹ In *Tales of the Hasidim*, ed. Martin Buber and trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), Book I, p.106.

² In the *Aggadat Bereshit* (32.61), according to Carol Meyers. See *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.472.

³ *II Corinthians* 1.1. Unless noted, all biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

now on,' he said, 'we regard no one from a human point of view'. It was a pretty complete list.

'We know Christ no longer in that way...If *anyone* is in Christ, there is a new creation; *everything* old has passed away; see, *everything* has become new!' When our eyes have been truly opened, like Joshua's were, nothing can be the same. If we've been squinting or shading our eyes, if we've imagined our little spiritual zone of reality to be all there is, if we've given the rest to the world, the flesh and the devil, then we're back there with the unenlightened Joshua—before God's messenger told him in whose presence he stood.

Well, what was so different? How could the Apostle say: '*Everything* has become new!?' It's obvious, says St. Paul. It has to do with reconciliation—a word he uses five times in a few verses just so we don't miss the point. He wasn't much for gentle nudges; the apostle generally preferred a hard elbow to the ribs so there was no chance to misunderstand him.

'Everything has become new! All this is from God, who *reconciled* us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of *reconciliation*; that is, in Christ God was *reconciling* the world to himself...and entrusting the message of *reconciliation* to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ...be *reconciled* to God. For our sake [God] mad [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Opened eyes see *reconciliation* everywhere.

Christians confess that 'for us and for our salvation' Christ became 'incarnate of the Virgin Mary' and was made a human.

'For our sake [Christ] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. And the third day he rose again.'

All for us. We switched places with the son of God. Some call this the 'vicarious atonement'. As Athanasius put it, more simply: through Christ God joined humanity so that through that same Christ we could be joined to God. This is reconciliation. This is the Gospel story in a nutshell. This is what we give thanks for at every Eucharist.

In other words, God didn't wave his hands in the air in Harry Potter style and utter a curious spell to dissolve the evil we inflict upon God and each other. Christ had to become the real flesh and blood reconciler between us and our God. And Christ worked the same reconciliation between us and our neighbours. St. Paul said to the Ephesians: 'For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.'⁴

⁴ *Ephesians* 2.14

So St. Paul pushes the Corinthians further along, and us with them. He prays our eyes open even wider. 'God has given us the ministry of reconciliation...we are ambassadors of Christ since God is making his appeal through us.'

We, the ones reconciled to God, become through God's mercy points of reconciliation ourselves. Our witness to Christ's reconciling power and our reconciled lives are one. The message and the medium have become one, as the Christian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, put it. Our words underline our lives, our lives echo our confessions of belief—or they are meant to.

To put it another way: we, now connected to Christ, with eyes wide open to the mercies of God are called to be real, human, flesh and blood channels of God's reconciling power—to those who now stand outside that connection. Evangelism and social action, witness and ethical lives are meant to go hand in hand.

But how does it work? Here we turn to the great parable of Jesus, such a great parable that Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate 'Prodigal Son Sunday' in their calendar, as they prepare for Lent. So they heard the parable in their calendar over a month ago. But it would really be better to call it 'The Parable of the Two Sons.' Or we might call it 'The Reconciled and the Un-reconciled.'

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Luke tells us a few verses above the parable: 'Now the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them".'⁵ In other words, Jesus wanted to help the religious purists, the theologically specific, the righteous living ones understand why Jesus shared meals with sinners: the riff-raff, the managers of corrupt, private tax collection agencies, the officials taking bribes for the Roman invaders, and their mistresses, and prostitutes, those who never darkened the door of the synagogue, who would hardly recognize the words of the Torah if they saw them. Why did Jesus receive their invitations to dine? Why did he greet them as fellows? Did he approve of their lifestyle?

Hardly! But Jesus approved of them as human beings in search of reconciliation. That was enough for him to dine with them (as it should be for us). They were quite clearly summed up in the story of the younger son, so well known. When they came to the end of their foolish ways they returned to their heavenly Father. What a wonderful story to express God's generosity to us, his arms stretched wide open in reconciling love, running to meet the wayward child before he arrived back at the front steps. So Jesus did with these sinners on behalf of God.

Now if you grew up in the sort of religious world that I did you would know this parable well, and you would have heard it when former sinners gave thanks for their new life in Christ. You would have heard how they gave up motorcycles,

⁵ *Luke 15.1-2.*

and drugs, sex and rock and roll, and more, and were now new creatures in Christ—behold, everything was new to them. No doubt, for many who gave their testimony in my hearing, God’s grace was far more real than it was for me—they were truly reconciled.

But I was stuck, sometimes, as an adolescent, a ‘teen-ager’, with the unfairness of it all. I had to toe the line, growing up where I did, while these glamorous folks got the wild parties (and the sex!) and then the fame of the testimony and the new life. They were ‘trophies of grace.’ It seemed to me that it was a kind of win-win life they had gotten for themselves in the end.

So I was sorely tempted to become the ‘other brother’ in this parable, though I didn’t know it then. The ‘other brother’ gets almost as many lines in the parable as the prodigal. And we, like the Pharisees are so often the ‘other brother’—we who trouble ourselves to worship in church, and attempt to order our lives by grace to reflect the life of Christ.

One has to be careful with the parables of Jesus, said the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. ‘They wound you from behind,’ he once said.⁶ In other words, you the Christian have just heard Jesus’ story, and satisfied yourself that you are the right character in it, and you turn to leave and suddenly you feel a pang. Is this parable perhaps all about you, and you aren’t the character you think you are?

If the truth be told, we would prefer to be neither character in this parable—neither the wayward son nor the ‘other brother’. If the truth be told, most of us in the church, whether or not we ever were prodigals, have often come very close to becoming the ‘other brother.’

Like the older brother in the parable, we don’t like to hear the sound of music and dancing. We don’t like to hear indirectly that God has smiled on the sinners and invited him to a great celebration. Like the older brother we get angry in our self-righteousness, and assume God wasn’t interested in our happiness, that God had no celebration for us. Like the older brother we find it hard to hear God’s word when he says: ‘You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’

The truth is, everyone is in need of experiencing God’s reconciling love, the reconciliation extended to us in the life and death and resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. And if we don’t think we need this reconciliation, like the older brother, it is going to be very, very difficult (impossible!) to be truly reconciled to each other and to our families and to our neighbours.

Jesus waits for us at his table, and he invites all of us to it. Which character are we in the parable? In what state will we arrive? On whose side is God? God is on the side of all his creatures, and so in Jesus Christ has reconciled us, and made us his reconcilers.

⁶ I regret that I do not have the reference for this quotation at hand.