

There are many passages in the Bible which refer to reconciliation. In many ways, reconciliation is the gospel. However, I want to focus particularly on Colossians 1 verses 15 to 23 as the beginning of this talk on reconciliation. Within this passage there are three unities, and those three unities are all based around Christ, and in being based around Christ call us to unity and reconciliation through Christ with creation, within the church and as individuals.

### Creation - Colossians 1:15-17

Here Christ is presented as “the image of the invisible God” and in verse 16 “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created”.

Within Islam, the unity of God and the unity of creation are held together theologically. It is something that we often forget in Christianity. God who is perfectly one has made a universe that is perfectly intact. The very nature of God, as seen in God’s creation, is of diversity and unity held perfectly together.

The richness of creation and its variety is yet all one, interdependent and whole. ~~From this comes our commitment~~ **The unity of creation is** the fundamental basis of our call for reconciliation with the creation, of which we are a dependent part. That is why climate change matters.

Second, verses 18-20, the second part of God’s creation is the creation of the church, of which Christ is the head, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, “so that he might come to have first place in everything”.

The church must find its way to visible unity, maintaining profound diversity, because Christ is the head. We often confuse this in practice, although holding to it in theory.

Within Anglican leadership, the Archbishop of Canterbury is often referred to as the “first among equals”, but in fact they are merely one of the many who belong to Christ.

The third unity is of our unity with Christ through his death on the cross. It is this unity that calls us to be missionary and evangelistic, because the gospel (verse 23) quotes “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven”. Like Paul, we are servants of that gospel. In these few and extraordinary verses, the whole call of the Christian is presented. It is a call to unity, to transformation and to internal finding of peace.

So let us look secondly after the theology at the context of the mission which we are called to live.. The context is not good, as we all know.

First, there is war and the threat of wider wars. In the considerable and rightful horror of what is happening in Ukraine, we have forgotten the issues of the other 49 conflicts around the world that are recognised by the United Nations. They include Myanmar, which is now in full-blown civil war, and significant other levels of fighting in Syria, Iraq, together with threats of war elsewhere in the Middle East.

In addition, there are continual wars across the great crescent of Africa, which stretches from Somalia in the east to Nigeria in the west. Then there is the extraordinarily rapid change in science and technology. This is a morally neutral issue, but which threatens and promises in equal measure.

It threatens the increase of injustice and inequality and promises the opportunity for fairness and hope amongst the poorest in the world. It holds in its hand new weapons that can kill more people, robots that can fight on the battlefield, and give to the rich and powerful strength which is orders of magnitude greater than their enemies. It holds equally the thought of machinery that can increase the provision of crops, and of scientific advances that will multiply the capacity of crops, both to feed, and to survive in hotter atmospheres.

And thirdly, most devastatingly, and over-arching all other threats, is the issue of climate change. We need to recognise that the major impact of climate change will not only be felt on the natural world and the collapse of biodiversity, but that will lead to serious problems of hunger, already appearing in sub-Saharan Africa, and thus of population movement around the world as sea-level rises. Population movement causes war, which in its turn prevents people focussing on climate change. Already we are recognising that some of the steps towards decarbonisation of the climate are threatened by the war in Ukraine and Russia and the need to have energy security and independence that does not depend on Russian gas. Quite rightly, this has to be a focus.

The final and very short-term threat, already existing to become a major issue of the next few years, is the disfunction of the economy.

From the crash in 2008 to 2009, European sovereign debt crisis in the early teens, the impact of COVID, and now the rapid growth of inflation, the collapse of logistics and supply chains, and the consequent most rapid fall in real incomes of the poorest in this country since records began in 1951, the impact of this hidden nuclear explosion will be fallout that causes chaos and misery right around the world, but especially noticeable for us in this country.

What will be the outcomes? They may well be recession or even depression. They will certainly be governments prone towards rearmament, to protect ourselves against further Russian expansionism as the war in Ukraine drags on or perhaps becomes chronic rather than critical, and to raise the hurdle from its present too-low height, which when leapt over leads us into nuclear exchange. Ironically, the answer to that is effective conventional weaponry. Or, if you prefer, the universal conversion of everyone and the end of sin.

So, what do we do with this context?

First of all I want to suggest that the diversity of creation and the unity in diversity of the Trinity, anchored in mutual love perfected, calls us to learn that we should not all be identical, but where we are different, that difference must be held in love within the church. And, because we are human and sinful, where we disagree, that we must learn to disagree well. That is a massive challenge to our ecumenism. It means reshaping to look out outwards and respond to the crises that surround us, with the love of God that is within us, and with the unity that can be reached between us. It calls us away from looking inward, to creating a zero sum church in which any group's gain is another's loss.

Second, in addition to our aim, I want to suggest an approach. The approach must be holistic, contextual, top down, middle out, and bottom up, and finally sacrificial.

Holistic: we too often behave, both in dealing with the conflicts between human beings within the world and in the conflicts within the church, as if we were minds and souls detached from the body. As is quite well known, I have periods of depression. When I am depressed, I become frustrated, less capable of dealing with anxiety, and I am more likely to be bad-tempered. Those characteristics come from chemical changes within me. That is not an excuse, there is no excuse for bad behaviour, but it is a reason. When I forget the body, I ignore one of the key **means** of dealing with conflicts in which I participate, to which I am subject, or which I initiate. The same applies to groups. Fears of other people's power can lead to chemical changes in the way the brain reacts. Neuroscience matters.

Contextual: the context of our conflicts is one of immense importance. Within the church the context is of a comfort about Christianity that meant that unity was a luxury rather than a necessity, and which has lasted the thick end of half a millennium. We feel it is acceptable not only to be different, but to other and to demonise. In the world, in Europe the context until the last few weeks has been one without major land wars between nation states since 1945. We are shocked because we have never experienced what we now see. Context is why it is so easy in this crisis for us to drift towards all-out war. The church is called, in facing the world, to be prophetic about the call of peace, the claims of forgiveness, and the hope of reconciliation.

Top Down, etc: Reconciliation never succeeds unless it comes at all levels of institution, organisation and conflict. I remember working on reconciliation in a local area in Nigeria. Unusually, we were very successful. For a few years there was peace, until, at a much higher level, a breakdown in relationships led to a breakdown of the grassroots. We had not done the "top down".

Equally, after the Oslo Accords, which ignored issues of religion, the “bottom up” was omitted, and it was the breakdown there, and in the “middle out” amongst the day to day work of leadership at the local level, that led to their breakdown.

Sacrificial: the passage from Colossians 1 ends with the mention of the cross. Reconciliation is deeply sacrificial. Jesus calls us to go, to live, to die, to be raised to new life with him, and to be at his side. We cannot avoid any of those, especially death.

So what action do we take?

Theological: the practice of division leads to the habit of division. “They” becomes how we describe other Christians. Theologically, we have constantly to come back to the reality of what we see here, what we see in John’s gospel, especially 17:21, and to the singleness of God whom we worship.

Deliberate: reconciliation, whether in the world or in the church, does not simply happen. If we look at 2 Corinthians 5, we see that the call to reconciliation is a call to a deliberate acceptance of reconciliation with God so that we may be one.

Accessible: we reconcile with people, not to people. We serve people, we do not direct people. We demonstrate that we put ourselves alongside them, not above them or outside them.

Partnered and Holistic: none of us are capable of bringing reconciliation through our own selves entirely. One only has to look at Ukraine to see that there will be a need for reconciliation of mind, body, spirit, politics. There will be a need for meeting needs through rebuilding and a need to establish security for the future, perhaps by peacekeeping forces. There may be a need for worse. We need to know our limits, to share the load with partners, and to understand the nature of the body, both Christ's body the church and our own bodies individually.

Long term and equipping: the last gift of Jesus is the Spirit, who gives and gives and comes from God, and is God. John's gospel promises that the Spirit will go on teaching us. Our role is always to equip, not to create dependence, but sustainability through a direct relationship with God. Reconciliation is something to be shared, trained in, and given away. The Difference Course, written at Lambeth Palace but designed for churches of all sorts, and being rolled out more broadly, is a form of training.

### Conclusion

But the overall aim is very simple, that we are to glorify Christ: yet our divisions do not glorify Christ. The capacity, the willingness and the ability, holistically and in partnership, to work together in a world torn apart by war, points to the Prince of Peace and opens hearts, minds, lives, societies, to grace abundant..