



**GRAY'S
INN**
—

Lent (March 17th) 2019

Genesis 33 : 1-12 & 2 Corinthians 5: 14-end

Reconciliation and Truth

There is a tragic coincidence in that the dreadful events in New Zealand come in the same week as the anniversary of the Sharpeville killings in 1960. The terrible massacre in Christchurch happened during Friday prayers. In Sharpeville it wasn't terrorists but the South African police who turned their guns on innocent people, and shot many of them in the back. The victims were engaged in a non-violent protest against the Apartheid regime. And if you go to Sharpeville today, on the edge of Johannesburg, to the cemetery where most of them are buried, what strikes you most is that some of the graves are quite short, because you don't need so much space to bury a child. Of the sixty nine people who were killed, ten of them were children. And another nineteen children had been shot.

We don't yet know the final death toll in Christchurch, how many people, how many of them children. We do not know how New Zealand will respond. In South Africa it was nearly thirty-five years after Sharpeville, and the first democratically elected government of Nelson Mandela, before the violence which Apartheid condoned, the violence on which Apartheid was built, was finally exposed. But then the most remarkable thing took place: despite what had happened in the past, the response was not the majority turning their guns, their violence, on those who had oppressed them, but the process which became known as Truth and Reconciliation.

Its main architect was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He sought to hold together two seemingly contradictory things. There was the need to tell the Truth, to re-establish fundamental principles of justice and equality, and to expose how political institutions and self-serving elites had betrayed them, and the suffering that had caused to the majority of the people. But there was also the need to find Reconciliation, for people to admit wrong-doing and to meet their victims, time for repentance and the forging of new relationships. For some, such reconciliation betrayed truth. But for those who did meet, there was anger, and there were many tears. Some people walked away, but others cried together. In the end Tutu's mantra was "There is no future without forgiveness", which could sound like pious claptrap from a pulpit like this, not least to a congregation of lawyers, but in South Africa it opened up a new way forward.

Holding these two things together, Truth and Reconciliation, Reconciliation and Truth, is not easy. When does Reconciliation re-establish Truth, and when is it just an easy way of avoiding what Truth requires?

Our Old Testament lesson this morning was that amazing story of how Jacob and Esau became reconciled. You remember how Jacob had tricked his father and stolen his older brother's birth-right, effectively disinheriting him. Jacob runs away, and when they eventually meet again, he is in total fear of what Esau will do. He seeks to ingratiate himself with his brother. Instead, he finds Esau willing to forget, even to forgive.

Within the Church of England this is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first Ordination of women to the priesthood. We managed to get it through by creating structures which allowed those opposed to stay within the Church, "flying bishops", and the rest. We are expected to give respect and formally recognize those who still believe it was a wrong move. Are we a reconciled community, or one that still fails to uphold the truth about the equal status of women?

Similarly, in the wider Anglican Communion, where the delayed Lambeth Conference is now taking shape for next summer, there are some very different understandings with regard to human sexuality. For some people Truth is about finally and fully accepting same-sex relationships and even marriage. For others Truth is an appeal to Scripture to uphold the opposite. Some say "Let us walk together", despite our differences. Others say "No", we cannot be reconciled until you change your mind: on the one side, stop oppressing LGTB+ people, on the other, return to traditional faith. Uganda and Nigeria have already said that they will not come next summer

What might this say about our own country, at this time of division and chaotic politics? The voice of the Church has been somewhat muted. The most common call from Christian leaders has been for reconciliation, and for the nation to come together. And who can doubt the need for that, now, and even more when the whole sorry business is over, one way or another? But the Church has largely failed to articulate where what we believe, the values we espouse on the basis of the Gospel, might engage with the arguments for or against Brexit.

I don't use this pulpit to propose which direction that might take us in. But the Christian faith does have important things to say about how we live together, and about a different way forward. The Brexit debate has been dominated by progressives versus traditionalists, and by neo-liberals and populists, sometimes in conflict, sometimes finding common cause. Its background has been the rampant individualism and the aggressive tribalism which now characterise Western thinking. The way forward is not some easy reconciling of these different "truths", but a commitment to a much greater and deeper understanding of Reconciliation, giving priority to peace-building, social and economic justice, equal rights, and human dignity. And that would lead us to a much more radical assessment and criticism of both the European Union as it currently works and the alternatives to membership of it.

We are, after all, in the season of Lent. A time for such self-examination. A time to stop and ask where we are going. Ash Wednesday reminded us of the most basic truth: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return". But it also held open the offer of Reconciliation: "Repent and believe the Gospel". Far from sunny optimism and easy answers the Christian faith faces up to the reality of our human condition. We cannot side-step who we are. But we can see, we can trust, in a reality beyond that, a Truth which is real Reconciliation.

This is the new order of which Paul spoke in our second lesson. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation". The Cross of Christ – "the saving victim opening wide the gate of heaven to us below" (1) – challenges all the half-truths of the politicians and all the easy reconciliation by which we might avoid facing reality. It declares "in shining letters, 'God is love' ". (2) And that is our hope, for ourselves, and for our world.

(1) *from the Anthem, "O Salutaris Hostia"*

(2) *from the final hymn, "We sing the praise of him who died"*