

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE - SUNDAY 6th SEPTEMBER 2020

INTRODUCTION

Back in the 1970's Elvis Costello penned the words of the song 'Girls Talk' which was later recorded and released by Dave Edmunds in 1978. Memorably, it opens with the following words – **"there are some things you can't cover up with lipstick and powder"**. There is a real depth of meaning to those opening lyrics. Rather like the message in Matthew's gospel today about conflict and reconciliation – which will inevitably happen in any given community - **it's no use papering over the cracks**. True restoration of relationship or community can only occur when it is offered transparently and comes from the heart.



St. Paul too speaks of this transparency by reminding us of our duties towards one another. Asking us to **remove our dark deeds** as if they were garments and **clothe ourselves instead with the loving presence of Christ**.

So pause for a moment to ask yourself, "What would it be like for me to be clothed with the presence of Christ right now?" "What feels like it is broken in my life that needs the healing power of Christ?" And allow yourself to be open to the possibility that when Jesus says he is present whenever his people meet in his name (which surely includes praying these At Home services, or meeting by Zoom!) – he really means it!

CALL TO WORSHIP

O God, you summon the day to dawn,
you teach the morning to waken the earth.

**GREAT IS YOUR NAME,
GREAT IS YOUR LOVE.**

For you the valleys shall sing for joy,
the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

**GREAT IS YOUR NAME,
GREAT IS YOUR LOVE.**

For you the monarchs of the earth shall bow,
the poor and persecuted shall shout for joy.

**GREAT IS YOUR NAME,
GREAT IS YOUR LOVE.**

Your love and mercy shall last forever,
fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise.

**GREAT IS YOUR NAME,
GREAT IS YOUR LOVE.**

TURNING TO GOD

We come to God as one from whom no secrets are hidden,
To ask his forgiveness and peace.

We confess to you, our selfishness and lack of love:
fill us with your Spirit.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess to you our fear and failure in sharing our faith:
fill us with your Spirit.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

We confess to you our stubbornness and lack of trust:
fill us with your Spirit.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Silence

**The Lord enrich us with his grace,
and nourish us with his blessing;
the Lord defend us in trouble and keep us from all evil;
the Lord accept our prayers,
and absolve us from our offences,
For the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.**

PRAISING GOD

The love of God has been poured into our hearts
Through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

We dwell in him and he in us.

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him,
and speak of all his marvellous works.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty,
who was and is and is to come.

A Prayer for Understanding (PSALM 119.33-40 Good News Translation)

Teach me, Lord, the meaning of your laws,
and I will obey them at all times.

**Explain your law to me, and I will obey it;
I will keep it with all my heart.**

Keep me obedient to your commandments,
because in them I find happiness.

**Give me the desire to obey your laws
rather than to get rich.**

Keep me from paying attention to what is worthless;
be good to me, as you have promised.

**Keep your promise to me, your servant—
the promise you make to those who obey you.**

Save me from the insults I fear;
how wonderful are your judgments!

**I want to obey your commands;
give me new life, for you are righteous.**

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 13:8-end New Living Translation)

Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbour, you will fulfil the requirements of God's law. For the commandments say, "You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet." These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfils the requirements of God's law. This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here.

So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes and put on the shining armour of right living. Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.



Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 18:15-20 NRSV)

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.



Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

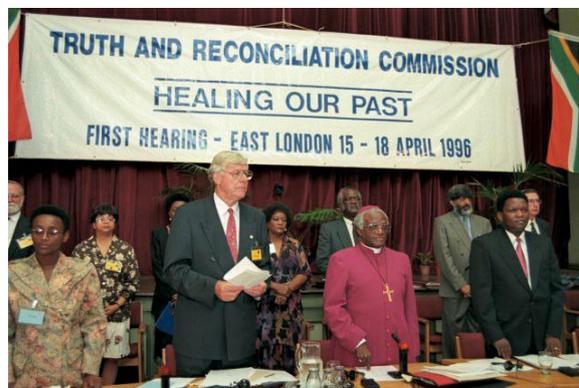
Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Andy Todd)

I still vividly remember falling in love with the "Rainbow Nation" – South Africa. It was straight after I left University: I spent a few months in the Far North Transvaal working with the Anglican Church there, and something about the country touched me deeply - its diverse and beautiful landscapes and diverse and beautiful people. It was the time when the Apartheid regime was unravelling, and there was a palpable sense of hope in the air. But I also remember wondering whether the hope would turn out to be a mirage. How could people who had endured so much suffering and oppression at the hands of their fellow South Africans possibly learn to move on and live together? Wouldn't it all descend into a mess of violence and recrimination?



You will have your own view of how successful South Africa has been in the intervening years at coming to terms with its past and healing old divisions. But that it has done so at all is surely due in no small part to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up back then by the newly-formed government to help heal the country. What was perhaps unique about the Commission at the time was its commitment, not simply to seeking retribution for past injustices (think of the Nuremberg Trials), but to achieving lasting reconciliation. It was founded on the principle that the only way to do this was through a long and often painful process of establishing the truth of what had happened, by listening to the stories both of those who had been wronged, and of those accused of wronging them. For many South Africans, that process literally transformed the way they understood their place in society and responsibility for its history, and laid the foundation for the possibility of a new sense of community and nationhood.



The Commission's approach seems to me to have a lot in common with the way Jesus instructs his followers to deal with damaged or broken relationships with other Christians. (After all, it's probably no coincidence that one of the chief architects of the Commission was Archbishop Desmond Tutu.) Jesus recognises that differences will emerge and fallings-out will happen, and the way to deal with them is not to pretend they are not there or that they are not really that important, but to work for reconciliation through a commitment to truth.

The need for reconciliation in our world is as acute today as it has ever been. That is true on the global stage: witness the simmering anger where racial equality has been denied; witness the breeding-grounds for terrorism where



nations or ideologies at loggerheads refuse to talk to each other; or the still-fresh fault lines in our own country due to the Brexit process. But it is also true much closer to home, in the broken relationships, shattered families and feuds with

neighbours that I would guess we have all experienced or seen around us. Just as sadly, it is all too often there in the divisions within the Church, too.

Jesus sets out a very specific approach to resolving feuds in the Church: first, a private conversation, then involving a small number of reliable and impartial witnesses, then – if necessary – an appeal to the whole Church (presumably the local Church). It is great advice, and following it could have averted most of the disputes I for one have ever witnessed in Church circles.

But what really strikes me about Jesus' advice is the way it perfectly holds together those twin priorities – the need for both truth and reconciliation. The kind of engagement he urges requires honesty and clear communication from everyone involved. It's not just about finding people who will back up your point of view: it's about being willing to listen to others who may tell you that, actually, you are not completely in the right here. That can be a bitter pill to swallow, but there can be no lasting reconciliation without it.

And lasting reconciliation is the aim. It's not about getting to the point where you can feel smug in your own rightness, and wash your hands of the "wrong-headed" person who injured you. How did Jesus say you are to treat someone if they refuse to be reconciled? "Like a gentile or a tax collector." But who was Jesus routinely criticised for spending far too much time with, trying to win them over? That's right – gentiles and tax collectors (among others)! The point is that your commitment to working with the person with whom you have had a falling-out does not stop at that point: if anything, it needs to shift up a gear.

It's clear that in Jesus' mind, his followers are to be people with the strongest possible commitment to living honestly and in harmony with one another. And St Paul, arguing that to live with integrity and love in all your dealings with others is to fulfil the demands of all proper laws, broadens the scope: as far as possible, Christians are to be people committed to honesty and reconciliation in all their relationships, not just with other Christians.

Why is that so? Why are truth and reconciliation so important? I think both Jesus and Paul give very similar answers, although in different language.

"If two of you agree about anything", says Jesus; "if you gather together in my name, I am there." In other words, when people put aside their genuine (and sometimes painful) differences and work for a common goal, for the love of God and of one another, Jesus' healing presence is made real in the world. When you and I "put on the Lord Jesus", as Paul says – i.e. when we clothe ourselves with the same character as Jesus, his passion for truth and commitment to seeing people reconciled with God and with one another – then the world experiences light shining in darkness, the sheer attractiveness of the Gospel. The reality of Heaven begins to break into the brokenness of Earth.

How transformed our relationships would be if we had the courage to follow Jesus' advice whenever we have a falling-out!

But even more than that. How might we transform the world if we could be gripped by a vision of the kind of human community which Jesus and St Paul envisage: where we are all different and have our differences, but through an unwavering commitment to each other we learn through those differences to discover deeper truths, about God, the world and ourselves.

A Church like that really would be a *Rainbow Nation* – a community where our God-given diversity is recognised and celebrated, and where the divided nations might glimpse a hope that one day, by the grace of God, there might really be, not just a Rainbow Nation, but a *Rainbow World*.



Pause for Reflection

Jesus calls us here to meet him
as through word and song and prayer
we affirm God's promised presence
where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
praise the Son who calls us friends;
praise the Spirit who, among us,
to our hopes and fears attends.

Jesus calls us to confess him
Word of Life and Lord of All,
sharer of our flesh and frailness
saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
tell his tales that all may hear;
tell the world that Christ in glory
came to earth to meet us here.

Jesus calls us to each other:
vastly different though we are.
Creed and colour, class and gender,
neither limit nor debar.
Join the hand of friend and stranger;
join the hands of age and youth;
join the faithful and the doubter
in their common search for truth.

LET US DECLARE OUR FAITH IN GOD

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

PRAYERS

In our need and human weakness,
Let us come to Almighty God with our prayers.

Unchanging God, change us from the heart
until the whole church awakens to your love
that reaches out, nurtures and celebrates.
Neither holding back from what is difficult,
nor rushing in where angels fear to tread.
We pray for sensitivity and courage.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:
And lead us.

Almighty God, give us such love for the world
that we may pray with longing desire,
'Your Kingdom come.'

Give our leaders the grace to see
their work as service and their role as stewards;
and sharpen both the recognition of needs
and the commitment to just provision.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:

And lead us.

Merciful God, break all habits
of destructive behaviour
in our homes, our families, our friendships
and in all the homes of this parish.
Develop our ability to celebrate what is good
and face what is not with honesty.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:

And lead us.

Healing God, lay your hands on those who suffer,
so that they may know the support of your presence
and find wholeness and peace in your love.
We pray especially for all who feel
they are beyond your love and forgiveness.
May they quickly discover
the freedom of your acceptance.

We hold to your love all who are ill; and from our own community, we pray
especially for Ian King.
And in a moment now we offer you the people on our own hearts.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:

And lead us.

Eternal God, in your unchanging love
receive all those who have died in faith,
that they may rejoice in you forever.

We remember the recently departed, among them Ilona Gowers.

And those whose anniversary of death falls at this time: Jean Wallace, Len Pink,
and Dennis Amos.

Lord, grant us with them a share in your eternal kingdom.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:

And lead us.

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin
against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass
against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory, for ever
and ever.
Amen.**

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers

For the sake of your Son,

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

CLOSING BLESSING

**May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.**

**May He guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm.**

**May He bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders He has shown you.**

**May He bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.**

SENDING

May God bless us;
may God keep us in the Spirit's care
and lead our lives with love.

**MAY CHRIST'S WARM WELCOME
SHINE FROM OUR HEARTS
AND CHRISTS OWN PEACE PREVAIL
THROUGH THIS AND EVERY DAY,
TILL GREATER LIFE SHALL CALL.
AMEN.**

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