

## Our extraordinary God and reconciliation

St Brandon's

Colossians 1:15-20; John 1: 1-14

4 February 2024

Shortly after Alison and I were married, young and naïve as we were, we were invited to dinner with a friend of Alison's who had also recently married (a kind of 'show off your new husband' event). She had kept her own name, and we were introduced to him only by his first name. He was quite a bit older than her and us, and as the evening progressed it became clear that he was in politics. And, indeed, that he was quite possibly a rather senior politician. But even having established his surname it left us none the wiser.

So we left with the question 'Who is he?' unanswered. And it was only when we met up with my older brother, who was into these kinds of things, that it emerged that he had been an MP, then the UK Permanent Representative to UN, was or was just about to become a European Commissioner, and he then went on to the House of Lords!

Now I tell that story because, believe it or not, I think it has some parallels with today's readings(!) People who came into contact with Jesus found themselves asking the same question as we did: 'Who is He?'. The disciples, for example, in the boat on the Sea of Galilee after Jesus had stilled the storm say, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41). And Jesus Himself prompted the question when He asked the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13). And, as we know, He received different answers – Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets – until Peter came out with the 'correct' answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

So, the first disciples worked from what they knew of Jesus – the stilling of the storm, but also other miracles, healings and signs, Jesus's teaching and then of course His death and in particular His resurrection – to really begin to answer that question: 'Who is He?'. They worked from the bottom up, as it were, from their experience of Him, to begin to realise who this Jesus really was. So, in 1 John, for example, we find this: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1:1). This is the Jesus they knew personally, had shared their lives with, but who they now realised was so much more than just the human being they had come to know. And that is quite similar to what John says in his gospel as we heard it this morning: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us".

And having made these connections, the claims concerning who Jesus was and is became quite extraordinary. He was the Word who was with God and, indeed, was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being, as it says in John's gospel. And similarly, Paul in Colossians: "He is the image of the invisible God; in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him ... in him all things hold together ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell". Wow we should say!

So, my first point this morning is that Christianity makes these extraordinary claims as to who Jesus was and is, claims which, if true, make it impossible to say, 'Oh, he was just a good man', or 'I like some of his teaching, but ...'. It is a fundamental tenet of our faith that these extraordinary

claims are indeed true. *And* it is a fundamental tenet of our faith that these extraordinary claims are based on experience, the experience particularly of the early disciples as they got to know Jesus and work out who He must be.

They weren't making things up, and nor were they jumping to conclusions. Instead, on mature reflection, they arrived at these conclusions as to who Jesus must be. And so we, when we are commending our faith in word or deed, have no reason to water down these claims. Indeed, quite the opposite – it is up to us to proclaim these extraordinary claims, and to invite others to explore for themselves whether they are indeed true.

Now I want to go on from there to look at one of these claims in particular. And it's the claim in our Colossians reading that God was, through Christ, pleased to reconcile to Himself all things. And the first thing to note is that phrase "all things". It comes up five times in this short passage from Colossians: in him *all things* in heaven and earth were created; *all things* have been created through him and for him; he is before *all things*; in him *all things* hold together; and then as we've seen, through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*. It comes up too in the prologue to John's gospel: *all things* came into being through him.

And the importance of 'all things' is that it clearly doesn't just mean 'human beings'. Yes *all* human beings are included, not just some. But it's also referring to the whole of God's creation, *all* the things that were created through Jesus and for Jesus. So, God's purpose and indeed his pleasure (God was *pleased*, it says), was to reconcile *all things* to himself.

But it's also worth noting that it says God "*was* pleased to reconcile" not "is pleased" or "will be pleased".<sup>1</sup> This is an act that has already taken place, even if we have yet to see it worked out in all its fullness. God *has already* through Christ reconciled all things to Himself.

Now that, again, is a quite extraordinary claim. Is it really possible that Israelis and Palestinians have already been reconciled to God and therefore to each other, and that therefore we will see this in the fullness of time? And Russians and Ukrainians? And the murderer and their victim? And the abuser and their victim? And the whole created order, in all its current disorder, restored and reconciled to God? And the answer is 'Yes'. It is already guaranteed. It will happen because God through Christ has already achieved it. Wow we should say again!

But if so, what then of us? What does it mean for us here and now? Well let me take a current issue in the church which threatens to tear us apart – the whole debate around Living in Love and Faith (LLF), and the blessing of same-sex unions in church. A recent statement by the joint lead bishops for the LLF process, two bishops who come from different 'sides' in the debate, put it rather bluntly. "We are at a crossroads: either we have reached the point of separation, accepting that different views cannot co-exist within the same Church, or we must shift the debate to the question how we live well with difference. We believe firmly in the latter approach, and, therefore, we are issuing a call for reconciliation and bridge-building".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the Greek, "was pleased" is in the aorist tense, which is a past tense with no comment on the manner in which the action took place – unlike the imperfect tense which would mean ongoing action in the past.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Living in love, faith – and reconciliation', *Church Times*, 25 January 2024 by Bishops Helen-Ann Hartley and Martyn Snow. Bishop Helen-Ann has, however, subsequently stood down in a dispute over the appointment of an interim theological adviser to the House of Bishops. This, at the very least, points to the difficulties associated with reconciliation.

But then they went on, “It is our belief that the primary witness of the Church at this point in history is reconciliation. Can we show to the world what it means to be reconciled with God through Christ [from our Colossians reading], and can we embody this reconciliation in our own life?”

If reconciliation is the primary witness of the Church at this point in history, and if that is what we are in any case called to by God who, through Christ was pleased to reconcile all things to Himself, then so it must be for us among ourselves here in Church, and in our own relationships, and in our families, and in our workplaces, and in our communities, and through our prayers and wider actions in seeking the reconciliation of all peoples and the whole of God’s creation.

That is the extraordinary call on us, which arises from the extraordinary claims about what God was pleased to do through Christ, which in itself arises from the extraordinary nature of the God whom we worship.

Wow we should say!

Amen