

Trinity College Cambridge
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Picturing the Christian Life
Genesis 32:22-32: Luke 15:11-32

Seeking Life
Rembrandt: The Return of the Prodigal Son

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The son kneels, others look on, the villagers scoff. Reconciliation, the finding of new life in transformed relationships, is to them a mug's game. And so it is to many today. Look away from Rembrandt's picture to the photo of some up to date prodigals; militias in the Niger Delta, an organisation called MEND, out in the swamps, drugged up, drink fuelled, and ready to kill. In the midst a former colleague of mine, under whose guidance I worked in that area. Prodigal sons in oil paintings look easier to forgive, to reconcile.

And then go to a small village in central Nigeria, raided in March by a well trained and organised group of Fulani pastoralists, carrying AK 47s to drive the people out of their homes and with machetes to hack them to pieces after they had been tortured. I was there two weeks ago, taking messages of solidarity from Archbishop Rowan Williams. With the pastor of one of the two churches, and the village leaders and some youths, as they are called, I walked the half-mile to the mass grave where the 300 victims are newly buried. The pastor's wife, five children and unborn child were there. In the hot dryness, they spoke of the memorial they would raise so that they would never forget. I did not speak of reconciliation or even of forgiveness; anything other than tears would have been atrocious.

Coming back we visited people attacked in the previous few hours, and, our guide taking a wrong turn were caught in a dead end in the wrong area. Jos is a city smouldering. People disappear daily, in ones and twos.

In such a place, and to people like that, what is there to say about the God of Rembrandt's picture? Where is justice, and is peace only going to happen on the far side of a mountain of killing and torture and are so war weary that even forgiving is a better option?

Reconciliation sounds like a soft option, but its reality is a confrontation with perceived justice, and an aim of beginning by transforming violent conflict into no violent confrontation; elections are reconciled civil war. Reconciliation takes risks with virtues that we hold dear, and stump speeches hold often.

Be careless like God

God takes risks with his reputation by working with human beings who often do the wrong thing. The Father is careless of reputation, running, and welcoming without hesitation or enquiry. God backs Jacob, a loser who fights Him. We are called to a certain holy carelessness that reaches out to both victim and perpetrator.

The father receives the son who wants not to be a younger son, utterly bound by convention and expectation, but a hired servant. He desires a certain distance and an element of independence. Is his repentance a foxhole conversion, or is it genuine? Jesus leaves him in the story feasting, not reconciled, because the process of reconciliation requires the building of new relationships and is long and hard. We are called to a wise and holy carelessness with forgiveness. That means leaving doors of acceptance open,

to friendship with bad people, and to discussion with enemies, while being aware of the human capacity for extreme evil. In the Niger Delta we distinguished between the man in the centre of the picture, called Asari, and another militia leader, called Ateke Tom. Both killed but the latter is little more than a hired gun, as well as eating parts of those he defeats, which makes entertaining complex.

Be a poor judge of character like God

God does not protect the treasure of His love and forgiveness, but gives it to those that any fool can see will fail, and to institutions in apparently terminal decline or serious error. The grace of God is given indiscriminately to those who will receive it. The Father lavishes wealth, respect and even the fatted calf on a proven failure. The treasure of grace is disbursed by God with the prodigality of the errant son. Grace is seen in an openness of spirit that reaches out, especially to enemies. Grace brings new life to those who are dying and know it. The younger brother seeks it, the elder ignores it, wanting neither reconciliation with his brother, nor fellowship with his father.

It is good news for the church, and for each of us. Grace reaches bandits on crosses, and tax collectors up trees. As Christians we should look for signs of the grace of God in all human beings, not qualifications for acceptance in a few. Our tendency to draw sharp lines is challenged by God's lavishing of grace. Our tendency to look for quick fixes is upset by the demands of grace for a holy lifestyle, and there the parable does not go. The work of reconciliation has an earthy lived out aspect; in the Delta or in Jos, weapons destruction, micro finance and job creation to provide alternatives to militia membership.

Be unjust like God

The Italian politician and former EU Commissioner, Emma Bonino, set up an NGO in 1994 called 'No Peace Without Justice'. The elder brother says "no peace without justice", punish sin and reward virtue, do not create perverse incentives to squander your wealth. But the father replies "if there is no peace without justice, can there ever be peace?"

In Burundi in 2003 a senior soldier pointed to a rebel leader at a joint meeting and said "his group killed 30,000 people, I will not be reconciled without justice against him". Which I suspect we all understand. But it is not God's way and thus cannot be the church's. We must stand for the victims, but we stand also alongside the perpetrators.

However, justice is at the heart of the nature of God. Justice has to have a clear voice, but it must be a duet with grace if there is to be hope of prodigals returning, of those militias changing. Too often we hold one or the other, either in naivety or in hunger for revenge that leaves yet more victims.

The grace of God overwhelms human sin, and the justice of God comes inevitably through allowing those who have gone wrong to bear the consequences of their own choices. Reconciliation in the Christian tradition is seen above all in the cross of Christ which sets a judgement on humanity and requires the response of obedience. Such obedience to grace and justice is at the heart of the work of reconciliation. This is why reconciliation in the Christian tradition transforms individual human beings and human societies, giving an opportunity for flourishing which is impossible where conflict and hatred divide, and why in cross and resurrection there is hope of new life and transformed conflict.