

SERMON FOR GOOD FRIDAY (Cape Town - 2 April 2010)

Text: ¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:16-21)

About three years ago I did a course in this congregation on "reconciliation". As I meditated on this sermon text, I was reminded of one of the stories that I told you then.

There was a man called Jerry, who was a lawyer. He was employed by a large international company. As it is these days, the company had an conference somewhere in the Far East. For this particular conferences the top management were allowed to bring their spouses along as well. So Jerry and his wife made arrangements for their three young kids to stay with some family friends. And excitedly they jetted off to the conference.

On the Saturday, the last day of the conference, they had a celebration. As they sat down Jerry suddenly recognised a lady seated across the table from him. Years gone by she was *first* date and his first love. They hadn't seen each other since their college days and didn't even realise that they were in fact working for the very same international company.

They started chatting and the evening turned out to be most enjoyable. They shared their stories. Music was played and they had a few drinks. At about 10.30 that evening Jerry's wife excused herself and said to him: "I am tired. I am off to bed. But if you want too you can stay". So he did. They had few a more drinks... and others started to go to bed as well. At about 2 o'clock in the morning, Jerry and his old girl friendly suddenly realised that they were the only two people in the reception hall.

As it was huge hotel where they stayed, Jerry decided to escort his friend to her room. When they arrived at the door, she invited him in. Jerry loved his wife dearly. They had been happily married for many years and he never entertained the thought of ever being unfaithful towards her. But that evening he was drunk. He had too much to drink. So he entered the room ... and they slept together.

An hour later Jerry walked to his own bedroom. Silently he slipped into the bed where he saw his wife sleeping peacefully next to him. The next morning he didn't say anything. They packed their bags and flew back to their country, where they picked up their three lovely children.

But in the days that followed Jerry was overcome with guilt. He just couldn't live with this lie anymore. So one day he decided to tell his wife what had happened. What followed, Jerry himself said, was terrible. They had the worst fight ever. Accusations were thrown around They started shouting and yelling at each other.

Jerry slept on the couch and the next few days his wife didn't speak a single word to him.

To make a long story short: Jerry eventually reconciled with his wife again. But it was tedious, uphill battle. Desperate to save his marriage, he sought counseling. The counselor told him that he needs to be honest about his actions to *everybody* involved. He had to tell us children. When he heard that, he started to cry. Then he had to tell his wife not only that he sinned, but that he understood the terrible hurt that she must have felt being betrayed and cheated by him. He couldn't get himself to talk to his wife, so he wrote her along letter and put it on the beside table. In that letter he spoke about the "trauma" he caused her and their children. He promised her that he would never drink during a conferences even again and that while traveling he would phone her at least twice day to tell how much he loved her. And then he begged her to please forgive him.

In many ways this story (filled with so much emotion) is striking. It is striking because these things, infidelity, happen all the time. We see it on TV. People sleep around and feel nothing. People cheat on one another and feel nothing. People steal from one another and feel nothing. And sometimes "we" even enjoy buying these gossip magazines and revel in these stories.

These stories don't really touch us. They don't touch us because we don't really have a relationship with those people we read off or see on TV. But if you live in a relationship with a person and there is infidelity or dishonesty it hurts. It hurts terribly as it was the case with Jerry's wife. It wasn't just somebody who cheated on her, but it was her husband, Jerry.

And that is where our story with God sets in. We are sometimes so unfaithful towards God that it can be compared to infidelity. We ignore him. We don't make time for him. So many things in life a far more important to us than he is. And most of time we aren't even aware of the fact, that he is hurting. He hurts when fellowship with him is less important than fellowship with our friends. He hurts when we find time for so many things in life, but cannot find 5 minutes just to be quiet in his presence to tell him that we love him.

He loves us - that is the point. Most people aren't even aware of it. But when he created us, he created us in such a way that there is a "relationship" between him and us. And indeed this relationship was quite perfect for some time. We were created in "his image". He cared for us and we trusted and loved him totally.

But since the fall of man, this relationship is broken. We broke it. And worst of all is, we are *not* like a Jerry who sought to be reconciled. The reason for this is quite simple: Maybe because we don't see God, we don't realise the magnitude of our transgression. And because our heart is not totally in this relationship (as his is), we don't grasp the severity of the pain we are causing him.

And therefore God - still driven by perfect love - did something extraordinary. His law of "holiness" demands separation. But instead of cutting us off, he changed. He **"reconciled the world to himself"**.

This is a sentence we tend to overlook. Usually the transgressor reconciles. Jerry

went to his wife and humbled himself before her. He asked her forgiveness and he changed his lifestyle.

With God the roles are reversed. Not the guilty one, but the innocent one seeks reconciliation. God takes the first step and says: "I want to be reconciled with you. That is how important you are to be me". It is not a cheap reconciliation. It is not a matter of sins just being ignored or glossed over - and you never talk about them. True reconciliation is only possible where sins are exposed to the core.

This is what happened in the life of Jesus - a life that ended on the cross of Calvary on Good Friday. Paul teaches us: In Jesus God himself was acting. In Jesus he found a way - not only for our sins to be exposed - but also for our sins to be paid for.

We need to remember, what separates us from God is not just a debt that can be settled with the stroke of a pen. If you are lucky it may happen to you with your moneylender. You may have a loan with a moneylender who one day decides: This money you owe him is not so important to him anymore. So one day he takes a pen, draws a line through your account and closes the book.

This does not work with God. It does not work because it is not about money. It is about a *relationship*. And for a relationship to be healed, the sin that caused the tension, needs to be addressed *and overcome*.

That is what Jesus did. He overcame sin. He paid the penalty. He broke down the wall that separates us from God. And the result is this: Because of Good Friday, God no longer counts our sins against us (.v.19b).

You sin, God does not hold it up into anymore. Why? It has been paid for. It has been paid for by Jesus. And God hasn't got a drawer where he stores the sins we committed against him and flashes them like a red card every time we sin. Instead God comes to us with the "gift of forgiveness". That is the gift of Good Friday. And he cannot wait to hand it out. Even before the robber on the cross could verbally confess the severity of his sins, Jesus already proclaimed: "**Today you will be with me in Paradise**". In short: You are forgiven! We are a family again!

Paul says about himself that he is now an "ambassador of Christ" entrusted with this "message of reconciliation" (v.20) . And he invites us, you and me, to take up this role as well. Our role is to go into this world and both preach and practise reconciliation.

Every day in this world you will experience something that is not quite just. Your spouse may be grumpy without reason. A work colleague may gossip behind your back. A friend may insult you. But we who have experienced God's reconciliation in Christ, forgive. We forgive not only when the other person has asked for forgiveness, or when the other person has recognised the severity of his or her sin. We forgive, because we live in the sphere where there is forgiveness. And we never keep a record of sins.

If you battle to forgive somebody else you have never understood what happened on Good Friday: God reconciled the world *to himself*. He reconciled himself to you. He

grabbed the initiative. The innocent one paid for the guilty one. Why? Because for God "relationship" is everything.

For him nothing is more important than you. For him nothing is more important than for you to live a relationship with him. He wants to care for you. When terrible things happen, he wants to comfort you. When worries overwhelm you life, he wants to carry the burden. When you enjoy success in life, he wants to be the first to share in your joy.

The cross of Christ is a declaration of unprecedented love. My prayer is that you will recognise it today and become a messenger of reconciliation. Reconcile with God and reconcile with one another. Amen.

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