

Sermon 2 Corinthians 5:14-21
Lent 4 10.03.13 Julian Templeton

“With us . . . worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of anyone.” 2 Cor 5:16 REB

How do we regard others? What are our criteria? Very likely, we compare others to ourselves. Is the person older or younger than me; richer or poorer than me; more or less successful than me? What does the person’s appearance suggest about her or him? What does the person’s speech reveal about where he or she is from, level of education, what is important to him or her? Humans are comparing creatures. It seems that we cannot help but compare others to ourselves. What I wish to argue is that all those completely natural and human points of comparison could be what Paul calls ‘worldly standards.’

Paul says that these worldly standards were once the criteria for understanding Christ. Paul himself used to be the enemy of Christ and the followers of Christ. Indeed, Paul wanted to eradicate Christians. But upon his encounter with the living Christ, Paul had radically to revise his assessment. The way in which Paul used to judge things as a zealous Pharisee underwent a revolutionary change.

Paul writes that the love of Christ now guides him. He has reached the conclusion that Christ died on a cross for all in order that those who live should cease to live for themselves but live for Christ who died and was raised to life. (5:14-15) This is why worldly standards no longer feature in his estimate of anyone. They are simply not important anymore compared to the one criterion of central importance: the death and resurrection of Christ.

As worshippers who frequent this Chapel, we cannot but notice the massive cross sculpture that imposes itself at the front of the Sanctuary. Constructed out of some of the old organ pipes, it represents a link with the massive instrument that used to occupy the space at the front. Apparently when the artist, Brian Falconbridge, was commissioned to produce a sculpture for the space, he was asked to make something ‘non-figurative’ in keeping with the Reformed tradition. And the massive cross that we see before us is what he produced. It represents the crucifixion and resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ. Paul argues that this central event should be the most important criterion in the way we think about, and relate to, other people.

Paul argues this because, for him, the death and resurrection of Christ is a cosmic event. The cross is the hinge between the old age and the new age. The cross is the point of transition between the old creation and the new creation. And this is why Paul writes: “For anyone united to Christ, a new creation has arrived: the old order has gone; a new order has begun.” 2 Cor 5:17

The old order is that which is distorted by sin. It is one of enslavement and fear, where the rich oppress the poor, the strong bully the weak, the clever humiliate the simple, and where differences become the source of division and enmity.

Some years ago, a new cinema was built in Birmingham in which there were no pillars obstructing any views, and no different tiers of seating, but one raked auditorium in which each seat had an equally good view of the screen. The management decided to reflect the advantages of the new egalitarian design by making all seats the same price. But as soon as it opened for screenings, the cinema management was

confronted with a problem. Cinemagoers who were used to paying for the 'best' seats were dismayed that there were no 'best' seats. Others who were used to paying for the 'cheap' seats were dismayed that all seats were the same price. In the end, the management decided to solve the problem, not by altering the seating, but by introducing two different prices of seats, which apparently satisfied the patrons!

What we are willing or able to pay for something can be an expression of our perception of our status; and our perception of our status is inherently comparative. But difference in status—especially based on income—is nearly always a source of division and enmity in societies. And we should note with considerable concern that even hitherto relatively equal societies, such as in Western Europe, are becoming increasingly polarised and divided by uneven distribution of income.

By contrast to this old order of division and enmity, the new order to which Paul refers reconciles and unites. The new order is one of forgiveness, assurance, and joy. In the new order: the rich empower the poor, the poor remind the rich; the strong protect the weak, the weak soften the strong; the able assist those less able, the less able provide the able with an opportunity to show solidarity.

And what is it that marks the distinction between the old order and the new? For Paul, the distinction depends on how we respond to Jesus Christ. Trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the means by which God reconciles people him to himself. The only thing that matters for Paul is how we respond to God's offer of friendship through Jesus Christ. Put simply: will you be a friend of God or not?

This, then, is Paul's sole criterion for regarding others: have they or have they not accepted God's offer of friendship through Jesus Christ? And the advantage of this criterion over all the others is that it is accessible to everyone. It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, strong or weak, able or less able: all may respond to this offer of friendship with God through Christ. But in order to accept this offer, we must make the transition with Christ from the old order to the new; and this is the challenging part.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding people's sins against them.” 2 Cor 5:19

The old order is distorted by the pervasive influence of sin. Sin is all the ways in which we construct barriers against one another. Sin is the self-centredness and vested interest that causes us to ignore the need of the other. Sin is the hurt we inflict again and again both upon ourselves and upon others. The message of reconciliation that Christians are commissioned to share is the good news of the gospel: when we trust in what God has done for us in Christ, he does not count our sins against us but forgives us. Hence the appeal that God makes to others through us: 'Be reconciled to God.' Conveying this message to people who are not aware of any need to be reconciled to God is, admittedly, very difficult. What I think we can do to convey this message is:

1. Not be drawn into to the thinking and language of unfavourable comparison and division, but treat each person equally as: 's/he for whom Christ died and was resurrected.'
2. Ensure that all our attitudes and practices reflect the belief in our common need to be reconciled with God and with one another. We do this whenever we gather round the Lord's Table. Thanks be to God. Amen.