

We can make all things new: mission and reconciliation

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Anne Richards affirms that participating in God's vision for a reconciled world is an integral part of Christian mission.

Scientists tell us that it is a given condition of our universe that entropy – a measure of how ordered or chaotic a system is – always increases over time. So systems run down and never start up again by themselves. Whatever is ordered becomes disordered and chaotic. Drop an egg on the floor and it will become disordered – not to say messy! But you would wait forever for a broken egg to jump back together again and become beautifully ordered. For things to remain as they are, energy has to be continuously added to stop disorder taking over. This is all nicely balanced by the laws of nature: impose order here and the entropy goes up somewhere else.

the author

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We don't need scientists to tell us what this feels like in daily life. If we don't organise our lives, clean, maintain and repair, things fall into disorder and decay. If we don't have our cars serviced they will eventually fail to work, our houses need to be looked after, cracks plastered, roof tiles mended. If you lose a shirt button, it will not put itself back on unless you mend it. So our lives are shot through with the attention needed to put energy into keeping order. In my house, entropy is particularly hard at work in my children's bedrooms. And it's true what the scientists say – that if you impose order in one place the entropy goes up somewhere else. After several hours tidying and vacuuming, I am exhausted and have to have a cup of tea...

So we are used to the idea that at the physical level we have to spend our energy keeping things from falling into disorder and decay. But do we ever

stop to consider what kind of entropy we encounter at the moral and spiritual level? We talk about living in a fallen world, a world which is not as God desires it. In such a world, all kinds of things happen which bring grief and pain, from the enormity of the recent tsunami disaster to a local road accident; from appalling famine and disease to a struggle with illness in the family. When these things happen, we spend energy to combat them, a moral and spiritual energy which is simply 'trying to help' or 'doing good'. We understand instinctively that the will to do good, to rebuild, to comfort and to heal can overcome the sense that we are helpless in the face of overwhelming destructive forces. The tremendous response that people are capable of in time of suffering, war or disaster, not to mention in the little things in our homes, show that it's really not the human way to say 'What's the point?' and turn our back on it.

Yet we are also aware that damage and disorder occurs in the way we live our lives despite the best laid plans of mice and men. The clear vision we would like to live by gets muddled. Dreams never materialise, lies get told, relationships break down, a child dies, the clarity of faith wavers, people are betrayed, mistreated, or ignored. For anyone involved in ministry, these

things are part of the ministerial task: pastoral care, counselling, comforting, helping and praying in the face of the dream of a happy, peaceful life that one day got shattered.

Reconciliation... a missionary event

When most people therefore think about the word reconciliation, they tend to think of what is required to address this damage. To be reconciled means to put differences away and to make up; it means to heal a breach, to get two people talking again, to mend a broken part in a relationship. In this sense, we always assume the damage first, the breakdown that needs to be repaired. But reconciliation is more than this and because it is more than mere repair, it is a prophetic act and a profoundly missionary event.

To understand why this is, we need to look at what mission theology teaches us about the nature of God. Mission theology understands God as a missionary God, who not only sends forth the world into being, but calls us to be co-creators in the matter of its transformation. But God does not call us to act randomly within a chaotic universe, just tinkering with bits of it, or tidying up the mess, rather, we are called to share in a vision of God's desire for the creation, a vision of worlds remade when the cycle of creation and destruction is at an end

and everything is referential of God's faithfulness, wisdom and love:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
Their young shall lie down together;
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole
of the asp,
And the weaned child shall put its hand on
the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my
holy mountain;
For the earth will be full of the knowledge
of the Lord
As the waters cover the sea.*

(Isaiah 11.6-9)

This is the end of God's missionary desire and the inheritance of all those for whom God longs. The trouble is that many of us talk about the hope of heaven and speak the words of the creed with its promise of Christ's return without necessarily owning that vision for ourselves or recognising our part in it. Yet it is part of our obedience as God's people that we share in that vision. I use the word 'obedience' deliberately, because the first important stories that we have from the Bible are the creation narratives in the book of Genesis, which paint God's

vision for perfected creation. God contemplates the creation and sees that 'it was good'. Yet because of Adam and Eve's disobedience, turning away from sharing God's vision and trying to impose their own way on the world, time begins to unravel and the creation as we now know it comes into being. After the expulsion from the Garden, Adam and Eve's world becomes our world, so what do we have to do to get back to the world as God wants it?

The answer to that question is hidden deep in the heart of the missionary enterprise and has to do with reconciliation. Stories about how this has to happen are embedded in the history of God's chosen people. The exiled people of Israel are led out of Egypt to become reconciled with God's will for them in their own promised land. Reconciliation for them is more than occupying their own territory and finding peace; the 'land flowing with milk and honey' is an eschatological vision, a dream of Eden. Peace, prosperity and justice are properties of that vision and it is this the people must hold on to if they are to kindle the same flame of desire in the hearts of others around them, if they are to become a 'light to the nations'. Yet we know too that the history of the people of Israel is characterised by pitfalls and lapses, so

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that the vision dims and dies. It is then that through scripture we hear the power of the prophetic voice urging that there is always the possibility of reconciliation between God and human beings and that such reconciliations are marked by powerful liberation and transformation:

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me
Because the Lord has anointed me
He has sent me to bring good news to
the oppressed,
To bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And release to the prisoners;
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
And the day of the vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn
To provide for those who mourn in Zion –
To give them a garland instead of ashes,
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,
The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
The planting of the Lord to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
They shall raise up the former devastations;
They shall repair the ruined cities,
The devastation of many generations.*

(Isaiah 61.1-4)

This is a profoundly missionary passage which combines the mission of the one who is sent by God with acts of reconciliation. Such acts involve physical reconstruction, rebuilding, re-making the world, but also moral and spiritual regeneration, comforting and healing. Such acts allow the glory of the Lord to be seen clearly, and revealing that glory allows the vision to begin to become a reality.

It is not surprising then, that it is these words of Isaiah which Jesus reads from the scroll in his own local synagogue (*Luke 4.18ff*). It is here that he identifies with both the mission of God and with the acts of reconciliation which are needed to make that mission bear fruit. Jesus' own ministry then, has a basis in acts of reconciliation which permit the larger vision of God's desire for all people to know and glorify God to be understood. So when Jesus heals people and forgives sin, this results not only in physical transformation, but also in a golden opportunity to realise the goodness and graciousness of God and respond to it. That is a choice that is given to the restored



'Reconciling hands', an embroidery by Pamela Pavitt.

person to share in their turn what God has done for them in Jesus, or to go their own way and not pursue the vision any longer. Such reconciliation forges powerful bonds between estranged or segregated communities (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan or in Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well), between 'clean' and 'unclean' people, between men and women, between adults and children, between the sick and the healthy, between the sinful and the righteous and the living and the dead. Everything that Jesus did in his ministry challenged such rifts and barriers and put in place the means for people to see that by small acts of reconciliation, the ultimate vision of the missionary God could be seen clearly and reached by everybody. No wonder the Pharisees hated him.

Jesus' ministry shows us why reconciliation is more than just healing a breach. With reconciliation comes opportunity, opportunity to cease scurrying around trying to stop things falling apart and to lift the veil to see God's glory and desire in a vision of perfection. Reconciliation within the mission of God comes complete with a window into eternity. The sacrament of reconciliation is so much more than confession and absolution, it is the provision of new possibilities, the renewal of God's call and confidence in us, without the burden of failure and regret.

Energising a new future

I said earlier that in physical systems we need energy to combat decay, so what sort of energy is it that enables us to transform lives and deal with the effects of personal and structural sin? Some philosophers would say that it is simply the will to Good – that most human beings eventually want to turn aside from anarchy and chaos and have peaceful, co-operative and just lives. Christians can be even more clear, our energy, the energy that is released in mission and through the worship of almighty God comes from Jesus and is operative in the world by means of the Holy Spirit. This makes sense, because Jesus' resurrection represents to us the ultimate act of divine reconciliation.

Walter Brueggemann calls the resurrection ‘the ultimate energising of a new future’, and he is right. Jesus’ resurrection transforms the notion that all that happens to us is that we grow old, sicken and die. His resurrection body is the vision of the eternity that God has prepared/is preparing/will prepare for us. So he is called the ‘second Adam’, enabling the way back to God’s perfect desire for the whole creation. Thus Jesus’ death and resurrection puts in the necessary moral and spiritual energy to deliver us from sin, evil and death, to make it possible for Christians to promise others the same release in a ‘sure and certain hope’. The events of Pentecost, for example, are profoundly reconciliatory, enabling people sundered by language and understanding to hear clearly the gracious words and works of God and undoing the chaotic symbol of Babel. The resurrection releases into the world a possibility for full healing and restoration. Responding to that opportunity results in the transforming effects of mission.

Our task then, is to remember the heavenly vision set before us and as St Paul gives it to us, for example in

2 Corinthians 5.16-21, a passage which shows us how reconciliation and being ‘ambassadors’ for Christ work together. Consequently, whenever we demonstrate reconciling work, whether it is a large thing like supporting projects through the missionary societies, raising environmental awareness and helping with disaster relief, or in smaller things, like helping mend broken relationships, we are participating in God’s mission and making the hope of heaven both more real and more near. The words of Revelation 21 are not just for the funeral service, but are about where mission and reconciliation are consummated: *‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more....And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See I am making all things new’.* (Revelation 21.1,5)

Because Jesus is raised from the dead, we can respond to God’s invitation to be part of this missionary vision and ultimate enterprise for the beauty of creation, the creation that is ‘good’. We can do this. We can make all things new.