

**Reflection for Ash Wednesday, February 10 2016**  
**Anglican Togetherness Group (ATG) Morning Eucharist Service**  
**St. Margaret's Church, Liguanea**  
**Theme: "Be Reconciled to God"**

**Prayer: "Salvator Mundi" (Henry Allon)**

Jesus, Saviour of the world, come to us in your mercy:\*  
 we look to you to save and help us.  
 By your cross and your life laid down, you set your people free:\*  
 we look to you to save and help us.  
 When they were ready to perish, you saved your disciples:\*  
 we look to you to come to our help.  
 In the greatness of your mercy, loose us from our chains,\*  
 forgive the sins of all your people.  
 Make yourself known as our Saviour and mighty Deliverer;\*  
 save and help us that we may praise you.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of (our) hearts be acceptable in Your sight,  
 O LORD, (our) rock and (our) Redeemer. Psalm 19:14 (NASB)*

Friends, our readings for this morning are familiar to many of us – we hear these beautiful words from the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Gospel resounding at the beginning of Lent year by year. The very fact that these readings have been chosen for each cycle of the Liturgical year should give us pause for deep consideration.

I have chosen to anchor our reflection this morning in words from the New Testament reading. As a background, St. Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians came in the wake of powerful effects produced among this group of early Christians by the first epistle which had led them to a close examination of their general conduct and spiritual state. In an overview of this second letter, noted British Methodist theologian and biblical scholar Adam Clarke states "Paul wrote this second epistle to comfort, to commend them and to complete the work which he had begun..." I share with you from 2 Corinthians 5, beginning a few verses before our designated reading:

**New Testament Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 (NRSV)**

[14 ***For the love of Christ urges us on***, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 15 And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them...17 ***So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*** <sup>18</sup>***All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ***, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;]... <sup>20</sup>So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; ***we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.***

Our theme for reflection today – **“Be reconciled to God.”**

Over the past few weeks, the Word of the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany provided unwavering assurance of “Emmanuel, God with us” and stirring Gospel stories of our Lord calling and walking with His people. In Lent, in preparation to celebrate Easter resurrection joy and Pentecostal renewal, we have the opportunity to turn the spotlight on our personal relationship with God - the One, who in His words through the prophet Jeremiah reminds us all, ***“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with loving kindness.” (Jeremiah 31: 3, NASB)***. In our daily office readings from yesterday, Shrove Tuesday, the words of St. Paul from another of his letters herald this season and point us to the kind of response befitting the unconditional love and call of God – ***“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.<sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him...” (Philippians 3: 7-9)***. Yes, my friends, the call once again this Lenten season is to be reconciled to God – to make our relationship with God our priority and focus – not just for Lent, but using this opportunity to establish or re-establish a rhythm in Him for our lives.

I share with you that this passage of Scripture from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians is very special to me, and has been instrumental in informing my own spiritual journey over the last few years. Made in God’s image, male and female, reconciliation with God is our deepest longing if we will acknowledge it. The call to reconciliation is also an ongoing challenge, because in the awesomeness of God, no matter where we are in the journey, there is always an opportunity to go deeper - the reminder that with Jehovah Jireh there is always more.

As I prepared to speak with you today, I pondered the question, what are the steps we take on the path of reconciliation with God? We can find direction as we turn to other passages from the Word for today.

**Old Testament Reading: Joel 2: 1-2; 12-17 (NRSV)**

“12 Yet even now, says the LORD, *return to me with all your heart*, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;<sup>13</sup> *rend your hearts* and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

“Rend” or “tear” is the verb used in most translations for this action on our hearts that is the key step in returning to the Lord. This is not a gentle verb – it implies true intention and vigorous action. It suggests that all of our lives, and most especially those “hidden things and parts” need to be laid open before Him. This can be a really scary prospect, but unless our confessions are grounded in absolute truth, the act of returning and reconciliation cannot be a complete one. How do we rend our hearts?

- Confession is by nature an act of **prayer**, and there is strong encouragement for the disciplines of prayer and fasting in the Lord’s own words from the Gospel reading for today (**Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21**). Our Lord challenges us not to be hypocritical as we engage in our spiritual disciplines. In prayer, we should go to our room, shut the door, close out all distractions and pray to our Father, **who is there**. St. Benedict, Father of Western monasticism, advises in his time-honored rule that when the distractions and temptations come we should “**dash them against the Rock that is Christ**” (**Prologue, RB**). Yet no matter where we are in our spiritual journey, we can struggle with the words we need. Where can we turn?
  - The Psalms are an unending treasury of personal and corporate prayers, and include seven designated as the **penitential psalms – 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143** – each providing options for articulating our sins and sinfulness. We will be exploring one of the key ones, psalm 51, in our time of reflection after service today. Of note, four of the other seven are used in the Daily Office Readings for today. Listen to these words from psalm **130: 1-3 (BCPWI)**

“Out of the depths have I called You, O Lord: Lord hear my voice; let Your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.  
If You, Lord, were to note what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?  
For there is forgiveness with You; therefore You shall be feared.”
  - Our Book of Common Prayer also contains prayers of confession throughout the various services and in the collection of prayers, available to us for personal devotions or corporate worship. These include the canticles Salvator Mundi (opening prayer) and Prayer of Manasseh, and a Penitential Order which follows the Ash Wednesday Liturgy.
  - Episcopal priest and spiritual director, Margaret Guenther, in her exploration of “**The Practice of Prayer**”, in a book of the same name (p. 44), challenges us:

“True prayer, whatever outward form it might take, is first and foremost a condition of loving attentiveness to God in which we find ourselves open and receptive to who we are in our deepest selves.”

- In this light, in addition to our personal and corporate prayers, guidance from a priest, spiritual director or counsellor may also be necessary to tap to the root of our deepest conflicts. We can be blinded to some of our inmost pain and its causes by various psychological mechanisms, some of which we develop as self-protection. What are really deep wounds of heart and spirit can manifest as physical symptoms. Even if we are aware of all this, we can be rendered impotent in the face of the intensity of the pain, and we do need to have courage in asking for help to rend our hearts and name the truth – the whole truth. Ultimately, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, one of the recognized sacraments of our Church, provides the opportunity, not only for confession, but for absolution.

**Be reconciled to God.** Sisters and Brothers, rending our hearts in sincere confession and truth-telling with God is a vital step as we seek to be united with God. The third verse of the beautiful hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” by Robert Robinson (CPWI # 463) reads:

*“Oh to grace how great a debtor, daily I’m constrained to be!  
Let Thy goodness like a fetter; bind my wandering heart to Thee;  
prone to wander Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;  
here’s my heart, oh, take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.”*

We turn to the words of our psalm for today: **Psalm 103: 2-4 (NRSV)**

“...Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—

<sup>3</sup> who forgives all your iniquity, **who heals all your diseases,**

<sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy...”

Friends, in addition to rending our hearts, we must claim our healing in the Lord. Renowned author Fr. Henri Nouwen in his spiritual classic, “Life of the Beloved”, in the chapter entitled “Broken” encourages us with these words, “The great spiritual call of the Beloved Children of God is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put in under the light of the blessing... Physical, mental or emotional pain lived under the blessing is experienced in ways radically different from lived under the curse...and so the great task becomes that of allowing the blessing to touch us in our brokenness.”

On the road to reconciliation, genuine confession entails truth-telling and naming of our brokenness – how do we then bring our brokenness under the blessing and claim our healing?

- The physicians, nurses and health care providers in house this morning will encourage us that, for any diagnosis we receive, it is important to follow appropriate treatment plans from our health care professionals supported by good diet, exercise and time for rest. These are proven and important steps in healing. For chronic disorders including cancer, mental disorders as well as various addictions, support groups can also be helpful both for the affected and caregivers, and our health care professionals can again provide guidance.
- Ultimately though, what we seek and should be seeking is the Shalom referred to in the beautiful verses of psalm 103 – the complete healing of body, heart, mind and spirit that leads to wholeness and peace regardless of any diagnosis and including a terminal diagnosis. Shalom can only usher from the Great Healer Himself.
  - Can we hear His voice today, drawing us with unbreakable cords of love:  
**“Do you want to be well?”**
  - If we are prepared to answer yes to that question, are we prepared to work through the obstacles, including those that we place ourselves, that may be deterring us from touching the hem of His garment, from allowing Him to touch us, from coming to Him to claim our healing? The Word for today reminds us that our reconciliation is **in Christ**.
  - Again, we will often need help in working through this, and our priests, spiritual directors and those trained in the healing ministry of the Church provide critical support. It is important to remember too that all our Sacraments, including the Eucharist, have a component of healing – the Sacrament of Reconciliation mentioned earlier as well the Sacrament of Laying on of Hands and Anointing have specific healing roles and notably should not be limited to those who may be terminally ill or dying.
- Hear these words of encouragement in claiming our Shalom from the ***Meditations of the Monk of Farne (John Whiterig, OSB, 14<sup>th</sup> Century, “Contemplating the Crucifixion”)***:
  - “So, precisely because I am a sinner, I have fled to Thee; since there is nowhere I can flee from Thee save to Thee, Thou dost stretch out Thine arms to receive me and bend down Thy head to kiss me; Thou dost bleed that I may have drink, and open Thy side in Thy desire to draw me within. What then shall separate me from the love of Christ, and prevent me from casting myself into His embrace, when He stretches out His hands to me all day long? Shame, at the sinfulness and impurity which defile me? No, indeed, a shame that would separate me from my Lord would be fatal. I will rather run to Him as

He beckons me to come, and by touching Him I shall be cleansed from all impurity of body and soul.”  
*[Aidan reading for Feb 8 from “Celtic Daily Prayer”]*

Rending our hearts before God and naming our truth, claiming our healing in God - who stretches out His hands to us, bends to kiss us and opens His very side to draw us in – steps to reconciliation with God who is calling each and every one of us this morning.

Are there more steps? Listen again to the words of St. Paul from the New Testament reading:

**2 Corinthians 5 & 6(NRSV)**

***5:18 “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”***

**6** “As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup> For he says, ***“At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”*** See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

<sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ... <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left ...”

Sisters and brothers, the Anglican Togetherness Group (ATG) provides a wonderful opportunity for us to engage in the ministry of reconciliation together in this beautiful corner of God’s vineyard. Over the past few years, we have worshipped together, walked together in our communities, and worked together, as exemplified by the initiative to bring various action groups and organizations in the area for discussions, spearheaded by the BSA. And, my friends, there is more.

From the very outset of the establishment of ATG, there has been the collective recognition that perhaps the most vital role we can play is that of our witness to the future generations who pass through this valley year after year, through the halls of UWI, UTech and UTC. The needs of our young people are many and various, and include the urgent need for spiritual guidance – support in their own journeys of reconciliation.

On the table before ATG now, and I hasten to remind us that we are all ATG, is a proposal to establish a community home where, in our togetherness, we can provide accommodation for students in most urgent need, and which can also serve as a space for developing spiritual formation activities for all of us, and those in our communities. A space, an oasis, rooted in the Anglican Church, but with an ecumenical vision of supporting all persons on their journeys of being reconciled to God. It is

imperative that we remain mindful of those around us who are also seeking to be reconciled, even if they can't articulate that it is God they are truly looking for.

Please join in praying for, and working through, the various ATG initiatives, so that even as we seek our own deeper reconciliation with God, we can support all God's children in this path, including our future generations, right here in tangible and sustainable ways.

In the words of Rev. Hyacinth Boothe from a sermon entitled "Ministry of the Laity" (1978), I quote: ***"The Church does not have a ministry – the Church is a ministry."***

***"The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all;...  
If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!...  
All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...  
So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."***

**Let us pray:**

Gracious God, we thank You for the love that does not let us go and that is calling and drawing us to Your very side today. We pray for courage to rend our hearts before You, name our brokenness and claim our healing in Christ. We ask for the vision and commitment that will enable us to walk with each other in the journey and ministry of reconciliation.

***Final verses of the "Salvator Mundi":***

Come now and dwell with us, Lord Christ Jesus;\* hear our prayer and be with us always. And when you come in your glory,\*make us to be one with you and to share the life of your kingdom. Amen.

*Suzanne Shirley-Newnham, February 2016*