

Change and Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a difficult and complex task. It does not happen overnight and it requires much sensitivity and patience. But there is only so much any third party reconciler can do. The parties concerned have to work at this hard themselves.

One requirement is surely the willingness to change. It is very easy to become set in one's ways, one's attitude. There is something in human nature that makes us believe that we are right and that we are going to stick by it. And two or more opposing entrenched positions do not allow much if any chance of resolution, of reconciliation.

At the heart of the Christian gospel is on the one hand a recognition of who we are and on the other a need to change. And we see that in the reading we just heard, from St Paul's letter to the church in Rome (Romans 12.9-21). Paul reminds his hearers of the qualities required of the Christian life: love and respect for others, patience, perseverance, generosity, hospitality, being alongside others, living in peace and harmony with others, humility. Above all Paul tells us how we should deal with our enemies, with those who persecute or attack us. We are not to seek revenge or act in the same way to them as they do to us. Instead we are to show them love and practical care.

For many of us all this may go against our natural instincts. Our inborn defence mechanisms often kick in. If we are attacked or hurt we automatically fight back. If we see someone doing something wrong we want to see them punished. I know myself that hearing in the media of yet another dreadful atrocity in Syria or elsewhere I feel angry and hope that those who commit such acts will receive their just deserts.

And yet Paul reminds us that vengeance belongs to God alone, that God alone is judge. For God alone can see into human hearts. We can only pray that the hearts of those bent on violence and domination will be turned.

If everyone lived the life described by Paul then many of the problems of the world would disappear. Yet we know that is not the present reality. Vested interests, distorted ideologies, ambition, lust for power, all these pressures are very real and very strong and cannot be overcome easily. And Jesus himself encountered such forces in his earthly ministry.

Yet individuals can and do change. There are those who commit acts of terror and cruelty who do come to see the better way, the way of love and respect. That was true of St Paul himself, who from persecuting Christians literally saw the light, the light of Jesus Christ. His life was dramatically changed, transformed. May our lives been changed too.

*3 June 2016
Kingsley Boulton*