

Lent: A Time of Reconciliation

A Sermon for the Church of South India, Trivandrum, 11 February 2018

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 58:1-14; Psalm 19:1-7; Epistle, Ephesians 2:11-22; Gospel, Matthew 6:1-18.

Merciful Master, Jesus Christ, we still our hearts before You, as we meditate on Your teachings. Be with us, Lord; open our hearts and minds, and grant us the wisdom to understand Your will for us. Amen.

Today is the Sunday before the commencement of the period of Lent this year. Starting from Ash Wednesday, Christians prepare for Passion Week, fasting and meditating, prayerfully reminiscing on the events that took place two thousand years ago, meekly observing Good Friday, and joyfully celebrating the Easter event. Lent is a period of fasting, repentance, moderation, reconciliation, and spiritual discipline. Its purpose is to set aside time for reflection on Jesus Christ — His suffering and His redemptive sacrifice, His life, death, burial, and resurrection, and the very purpose of all those events — and how they should impact our lives and our Christian walk. We will, today, meditate on the theme of Lent as a time of reconciliation.

The Bible does not mention the custom of Lent; however, there are several mentions of the practice of repentance and mourning in ashes to be found in both the Old and New Testaments. In Old Testament times, fasting was observed to express grief, mourning, and repentance. In the New Testament, fasting took on a different meaning, as a way to focus on God the Son, Jesus Christ. Such a focus was Christ's intent during His forty days of fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-2). In preparation for His public ministry, Jesus intensified His prayers with the inclusion of fasting. During His ministry, He taught us all that we need to know about how to fast and meditate in the right manner. In Matthew 6:1-18, Christ gives us instructions on the related duties: giving alms, praying, fasting, and reconciling. In each case, He places His main emphasis upon the motive, and warns against religious pretensions for the sake of impressing others.

We commemorate and celebrate the death and Resurrection of Christ on Good Friday and Easter Sunday respectively — a period originally observed as Passover by the Jews. Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread were observed by Jesus Christ with considerable attention, indicating that He wants His people to observe it still today. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8: "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." Leaven makes bread dough rise; a little portion affects the whole batch. Leaven is symbolic of sin: the message is clear, that an unattended sin deep within our inner selves can gradually corrupt the whole person.

As we come to the subject of reconciliation, I want to argue that the mere acts of fasting, meditation, or regular attendance at church services will not, by themselves, bring about reconciliation between God and man. A serious believer should pass through a succession of reconciliations before he or she is reconciled to Jesus.

Remember, the ministry of Jesus on this planet had a singular and compelling purpose: to reconcile man with God, thus reconnecting the disconnection that happened right at the beginning between God and man. That being so, a process of reconciliation should begin as Jesus Himself stated. He said: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Jesus wants us to be rid of even the smallest trace of leaven in us before we approach Him to be reconciled with Him.

I would like to extend the principle given in this passage, and say that before you can reconcile with your brother, neighbour, your own family, or anyone you consider an enemy, you need to come to terms with yourself. This could be a simple process of earnestly confessing our sins before Jesus and seeking His forgiveness: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Or it could be a more involved process, requiring us to be born again and to become a new person. In 2 Corinthians 5:17-18, we read: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation." Jesus has given us a ministry of reconciliation.

I would not like to stop there. Before we are able to reconcile with ourselves, we need to reconcile with our environment, with nature, and with all that God created. I recall a sermon a fellow minister delivered on the goodness of God's creation a couple of weeks ago. God is infinitely good, and therefore everything He has created

must necessarily have goodness inherently present within it. We often fail to see the goodness in God's creation; if anything appears to be of no value to us, we reject it. What comes to my mind is David's own sudden realisation about nature. David did not merely see beauty in nature, but saw how nature proclaims the glory of its Creator. If that is what creation is doing, we need to be reconciled to it. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4). The stars that twinkle, the sun that shines, and the clouds that float through brilliantly blue noonday skies, all bear witness to the grandeur of the God who fashioned each and every one of these remarkable things. To those with ears to hear, a chorus of praise to God is being sung constantly; the universe is like one giant choir, in a never-ending production of achingly beautiful melodies and soaring crescendos of joy to the Creator. There is every reason why we should be reconciled to the creation of God. Remember, God the Son, Jesus Christ, is in the universe, and the universe is in Him.

The process of reconciliation, therefore, is progressive, and at the same time comprehensive. We reconcile with God's creation, leading to such enlightenment that we reconcile with ourselves. By then, we are a new creation in Jesus, and acquire the spiritual strength and conviction to reconcile with our families, brothers, neighbours, and enemies. That is the point at which we can approach Jesus to be reconciled to Him forever.

God accomplished this reconciliation by means of two great "imputations", that is, the crediting of something from one person's account to another's. All the sins that all believers will ever commit were imputed to Christ at the Crucifixion, as prophesied in Isaiah 53:6. This cancelled our sin debt, nailing it to the Cross (Colossians 2:14). Simultaneously, Christ's perfect human righteousness is imputed to believers (2 Corinthians 5:21).

It becomes a far grander vision for us during this Lent than fasting or sackcloth and ashes alone. It demands a great deal more of God's people than they have understood until now. It is easy enough to go without food for a few days, or to dress in humble attire, in the expectation that we will receive a blessing from God for doing so. As we have seen, the cleansing of our inner selves is itself a ministry of reconciliation, preparing us to be reconciled to Jesus in the end.

Gracious God, who loved us in Jesus Christ, Lord, give us readiness and courage to reconcile with You, with all people, and with the whole creation, transcending our barriers and boundaries. Let this time of Lent refresh us with a new perspective on the Cross of Christ, by which You have reconciled us and the whole creation with Yourself. Strengthen us with Your Spirit, so that we may become Your channels of reconciliation in our faith journey; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forevermore. Amen.