

practical, concerned with the problems of modern life: the social, political, ecological, and above all the ordinary and familiar.

THE WAY OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue has to be described, experienced and developed as a lifestyle. As human beings we learned to speak. We talk, chatter, give and receive information, and have discussions – all this is not yet dialogue. Now and then, it happens that a deeper encounter arises out of our talking and our relationships, and an opening up of each, in more than intellectual terms, to the concerns of the other.

This is experienced by families and friends, and by those who share the same faiths or ideologies, but we are particularly concerned with the dialogue that reaches across differences of faith, ideology and culture, even where the partners in dialogue do not agree on important central aspects of human life.

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Dialogue can be recognised as a welcoming way of obedience to the commandment of the Decalogue, “you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” Dialogue helps us not to disfigure the image of our neighbours of different faiths and ideologies. It has been the experience of many Christians that this dialogue is indeed possible on the basis of a mutual trust and a respectful the integrity of each participant’s identity.

Dialogue, therefore, is a fundamental part of Christian service within community. In dialogue Christians actively respond to the command to, “love God and your neighbour as yourself.” As an expression of love, engagement in dialogue testifies to the experienced in Christ. With God’s love in our hearts we shall keep our identity in the pluralistic world and shall have peaceful dialogue with other faiths.

Suggested Reading

BEHR-SIGEL Elisabeth, *The Place of the Heart*. California, 1992.
LEMOPOULOS George, *You Shall be My Witnesses*. Caterini, 1995.
LOSSKY Vladimir, *In the Image and Likeness of God*. New York, 1979.
ROBERSON Ronald, *The Eastern Christian Churches*. Roma, 1995.
SUNG Bum Yun, *Ethics East and West*. Seoul, 1947.
YANNARAS Christos, *The Freedom of Morality*. New York, 1984.

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Reconciliation and History: Psalm 103

Archbishop Desmond TUTU of South Africa writes in his book “No Future without Forgiveness”: “...my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs (those we do not share a background with, who may even oppress us - NP). We belong in a bundle of life. We say ‘a person is a person through other people’. It is not ‘I think therefore I am’. It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong’. I participate, I share.” The chapter from which this quote is copied, describes a third way to deal with the trauma of a divided past: the way of Truth and Reconciliation, the way that was chosen in South Africa to start coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid. I will use the example of South Africa during this article several times as a reference for how in our time we can try and work reconciliation. Reconciliation is needed there where relations have gone awry – be it between people or between people and God – and realities are shattered.

ABOUT PSALM 103

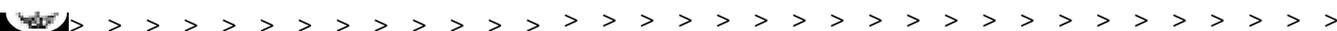
This Psalm is among those Psalms that are labelled as “hymns or descriptive praises” (N. K. GOTTWALD), as it begins and ends with blessing God. The body of the psalm cites “general and longstanding aspects of God’s goodness and power”. The verses above are the so-called body of Psalm 103 – I have left out the traditional opening and ending as they are less specific. Feel free to grab your own Bible and read the whole of the Psalm though, it always pays off to read the whole text, instead of some isolated verses.

Verse 6 tells us how God will act on behalf of those who cannot act for themselves, as God did for Israel when they were slaves in Egypt (verse 7). In verses 8 to 10 the psalmist tells us of God’s ways, how God relates to people, to then show us in comparative terms in verses 9-13 how they apply to people who fear God. Verse 14 is a prelude

to 15 and 16, showing that God knows of the temporary character of people’s lives. This temporariness is then emphasised by the everlastingness of God’s love in verse 14 – again the love for those who fear God, keep the covenant and remember the commandments.

ON THE TEXT OF PSALM 103

The Psalm uses quite some concepts that can give us a clearer idea of what reconciliation is all about, I will pick up some of them below. In verse 6 we find the word “oppressed”. Oppression is one of the main situations where reconciliation is most clearly needed. Where one person is more equal than the other, relationships go lopsided, and people cannot live to their full potential anymore – there is first of all a need for liberation (see the reference in verse 7 to Moses, referring to the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt), but what comes after that? To go back to South Africa, this meant that after Nelson MANDELA and many others who fought the apartheid regime were freed and free elections, that brought a landslide victory for the ANC, had been held, still things were not right. One of the first acts of the new parliament and government under president Mandela was to write a new constitution, which had an annex for the foundation of a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). Members from this Commission came from all different groups in society: black, white, coloured, Indian, women, men, Muslims, Christians, Jews, pagans, lawyers, nurses, clerical people, etc. Archbishop Desmond TUTU was appointed as president. This firmly based the Commission in a religious context (too much according to some). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission travelled the whole of the country, heard the testimonies of oppressed and oppressors (and sometimes the distinctions were not even all that black and white). People told and learned truths, people were heard, people received amnesty, and people received



financial compensation. And yet, things still are not right. Most of those who were poor and still are. Those that were better off financially, mostly still are. And those distinctions are quite often still black and white. How can people start working on a reconciled future when they still, every single day, live the consequences? It may take generations to equal the economic balance between the different racial groups.

In verse 7 and again in verse 14 we meet the verb “to know”. In the first case the knowledge is passed on from God to a person, Moses, and to the people of Israel. People know, or can know about the ways and acts of God, of how God intended us to live. In the second case it is God knowing about us – God knows us from the beginning till the end, even when we do not act as we were intended to act. God will not keep his anger forever (verse 9). Knowledge of what concerns the O/other (divine and human), what happened, what disrupted the right relationships is necessary, before a start can be made to make things right. Without the truth, there is no way of coming face to face again, to face the future again. Knowing the truth about something is not necessarily the end station either. It may help heal, but if realities are not changed after that, what does reconciliation mean? Having circumstances change, but not knowing the truth is not the solution either.

In the verses 8-14 we get to know a lot about how God *relates* to people, God’s way of dealing with us. All the characteristics are positive ones; yet they show us how remote God’s way of dealing is from the way we deal with our fellow humans and with God as well. Merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, not always accusing, anger passes, not dealing according to sins, not repaying according to iniquities. Jesus was the fully human being who lived up to that ideal. It is a challenge for each of us to try and live up to this example in our daily lives. Jesus’ violent death is often taken to be the singular reconciliatory act that ever happened. But during his life he set us an example for living in and creating reconciliatory communities. Our acts during our lives can help creating communities that work reconciliation now. As verse 17 states: the love of God is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him. That means that God showed us reconciliation in Jesus Christ, but it did not start or end with Jesus.

Then there are the little additions to all those beautiful characteristics: they will befall on those who fear God (verse 11 and 13) and to those who keep the covenant and remember the commandments (verse 18). Yes, our transgressions will be taken far away from us, but there are some requirements to meet. As I wrote above, a change in reality is needed for reconciliation to be truly worked. Reconciliation is an act of creation, the creation of new realities and new rela-

tionships. As Archbishop Desmond TUTU wrote: a person is a person through other people. We need to recognise each other’s full humanity. It is not for nothing that the commandments do not only tell us how we have to relate to the divine; they are just as much about how we should relate to each other, to be in the right relationship to God.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Reconciliation is not a process that will let you get off easily – it involves the fullness of our input. It does cost something; especially because things cannot go back to the status quo, it is risky business. It means that we enter into reconciliatory communities, to spread the process. This may not mean the same thing for each of us, we all have to find out for ourselves in our contexts what this means: what does reconciliation mean, what is the example Jesus set for me, how can I be a part of a community building a reconciled future. We all have been given gifts, and to use those to the full of their and thus our potential is a beginning of how God intended people to live. For me, as a white Western European woman, this might mean facing up to the fact that my comfort is being paid for, and I am not the person paying, that I reap the fruits of the exploitation of people and natural resources elsewhere in the world. It might mean facing up to ghosts of my past and putting them to rest. It might mean that there are social, economic, political, religious consequences on every level of my life and in the relations I have chosen to enter into. Communities take time to grow, if only we could edit away the mistakes of the past, adopt a state of amnesia where we can just all forget and start again. Amnesia, Nürnberg-like trials, or Truth and Reconciliation: these are the choices they saw themselves facing in South Africa. That the latter was chosen is an act of faith: faith in people who are inextricably bound up, belonging in a bundle of life. And an act of faith in God, that God has made God’s way known to Moses, the people of Israel and continues to do so, because we are

known by God. Reconciliation is not something that became fixed in one historical moment, we have to keep working on it together; it goes on and on and on – everlasting as the love of God.

Suggested Reading

TUTU Desmond, *No future without forgiveness*. London, 1999.
GOTTWALD N. K., *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction*. Philadelphia, 1985.
HARVEY Ruth (ed.), *Wrestling and Resting: Exploring Stories of Spirituality from Britain and Ireland*. London, 1999.
The biblical texts have been taken from the NRSV-translation (New York, 1989).

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Psalm 103

6 *The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.*
7 *He made known his ways to Moses, His acts to the people of Israel.*
8 *The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
9 *He will not always accuse, nor will He keep his anger forever.*
10 *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*
11 *For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him;*
12 *as far as the East is from the West, so far He removes our transgressions from us.*
13 *As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him.*
14 *For He knows how we were made; He remembers that we are dust.*
15 *As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;*
16 *for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.*
17 *But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children,*
18 *to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments.*