

## **God of Relationship and Reconciliation At the foot of the Cross**

We spend this time on Good Friday standing at the foot of the cross. Take a moment to pause and reflect on the significance of the cross.

The theme of today's reflections is relationship and reconciliation. We may look at the cross and recognise the significance of its shape. There is the vertical post which might represent Jesus's relationship with the father, and our relationship with God. It is in our nature, made by God, to seek relationship with God. More than that, we find our truest self through that relationship. Our very life – discovering all we were created to be – becomes clearer when we take time to be with God, to listen, to see ourselves as God sees us, with eyes of love.

For Jesus that vertical post was firm and strong. Everything he did was in the name of the Father.

The horizontal post shows us Jesus reaching out to others, building relationships in the world. His relationship with the Father holds him firm, and he never stops reaching out, never stops seeking to reconcile us with one another and with God. In the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, "he opened wide his arms for us on the cross." It is our calling, too – to reach out to others and to love them.

The cross represents the greatest commandment – that we should love the Lord our God, and our neighbours as ourselves. And on Good Friday we recognise that right in the middle of the cross, where the two posts meet, it can sometimes feel like we are being pulled apart. That for Jesus, who was always connected to God and never stopped reaching out to others, the result was this. On Good Friday, at the foot of the cross, we recognise the pain.

And yet we do so knowing that there will be Easter joy. As we stand here at the foot of the cross on *this* Good Friday, we know this is not the end. We can see the pain and suffering. And we can still believe in the beauty of God's love. In the importance for each one of us to continue to reach upwards towards God and outwards towards our neighbours. Because love will always overcome hate; life will always overcome death; good will always overcome evil.

This is the foundation for our reflections today. During the first reflection we will focus specifically on relationship and reconciliation as part of the nature of God. We will then explore what gets in the way. The third session will encourage us towards humility and self-criticism and the final session will consider radical openness to the other.

***Music – Wondrous Cross – Philip Wilby***

### **Session 1 – Reconciliation, relationship and the nature of God**

#### **Matthew 22:34-40**

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it:

‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

I wonder if you, like me, can hear this passage about the greatest commandment as tracing the lines of the cross. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. That’s the vertical line. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There’s the horizontal line. And they are connected. We are called to both, equally. Everything else in our lives is dependent on these two things.

Or we can change the image, and see the call to love as a triangle, comprising God, self and neighbour. Relationship is in the very nature of God – we worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three inter-relating parts. Everything about God points us towards love and relationship – we cannot be fully human without our relationships: with God and with others. When we see the triangle, we remember that no one part is more important. Taking time to know ourselves; to know God; and to know others. All of these things matter.

### **Genesis 1:26-28**

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

We worship a God who creates. Not only that, but there is a relationship between God and God’s creation. God spoke creation into being, and the relationship between that creation and God is eternal. God doesn’t walk away. Not only that, but creation is made to be in relationship, too. Humankind, especially, is made in God’s image – the image of a God of love and relationship.

And let’s face the challenges, too. God creates, and God sees the goodness in that creation. Goodness in the diversity. As humankind is called to be fruitful and multiply, we know that the diversity within creation will be increased. We can find difference difficult. It can challenge us. It is only a small step from difference to comparison. And yet if we see with God’s eyes, we see the goodness. We recognise that there is an abundance in God’s love which extends to the whole of creation. That the love God has for us is in no way diminished by the love God has for others.

### **John 1:14**

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

God creates, and God chooses to be with us. That is the message of the incarnation: that God knows what it is like to be us, to be human, that God loves us enough to want to experience all that it means to be human, and that God wants to be with us.

Think for a moment about some of the relationships in your own life. Perhaps about some of the people who are closest to you. And then perhaps relationships that are more difficult; those that have drifted. I wonder what it is that helps us to draw close to people? What is required for relationships to thrive? I expect we might recognise the importance of communication; of being with people in order for the relationship to flourish and grow. And that is the choice God makes. To be with us. To experience human life, fully. Not to shy away from truly understanding what it feels like to be us – in the good times and the bad. The root of the word compassion means “to suffer with.” We worship a compassionate God. We are known by a compassionate God. We are loved by a compassionate God. A God of relationship.

### **John 16:13-15**

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Of course Jesus’s life on earth, among us, did not last forever. But the relationship does last forever. A relationship with Jesus himself, risen, ascended and glorified. And also through the Holy Spirit. The Advocate. It is in the nature of the advocate to bring reconciliation. To reconcile us with God, and to reconcile us with our neighbours.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul speaks of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are essential values in maintaining relationships with God and our fellow human beings.

### ***God so loved the world – Stainer***

#### **Session 2 – what gets in the way?**

In session 1 we looked at the ways in which relationship and reconciliation are in the nature of God and the ways in which we are called into relationship, with God and with one another. And yet here we stand at the foot of the cross, remembering the day on which he was crucified. What has gone wrong? What gets in the way of us living out our calling to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves?

### **Genesis 3:9-13**

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

We’ve all been there, haven’t we? Something’s gone wrong and we need to take responsibility. But what we’d rather do is say, “it’s not my fault!” For those of us with siblings, it starts quite early. It must be possible to say that our brother or sister did it, not us. Or that they coaxed us into it. The

school playground can be the same. "It wasn't me, it was him." The finger is pointed. Responsibility is escaped.

And what about as we get older? What happens when things go wrong at work? How do we position ourselves? And how do we see others positioning themselves? Have you worked in places where you can recognise a blame culture – where pointing the finger has been more important than coming together to find a solution or way forward?

I wonder what we see when we look at our country as a whole. Where the balance lies between the need for people to take responsibility to ensure that people are safe – the need for enquiries into disasters like Grenfell – set alongside that phrase, "heads must roll", which appears to be much more about finding someone to blame.

In Genesis 3 we can notice some of the things we do that break down relationship and prevent reconciliation. When God calls to Adam, his reply shows a clear attitude of exclusion. He is speaking only for himself – the word "I" appears a number of times. The sense of "us" has disappeared – Adam has forgotten that he is in relationship with Eve. Eve has become "the other" – no longer his wife, but "the woman whom you gave to be with me." And of course he passes on the blame – as does Eve. The woman gave me the fruit; the serpent tricked me.

In order to build healthy relationships we need to recognise our shared humanity. As soon as we start to see "us" and "them", to identify some people as "the other", relationships are eroded. The call to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves cannot be fulfilled.

### **John 1:45-51**

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? I wonder what our equivalent is. Which statements would reveal our own underlying prejudices; the stereotypes that form our understanding of the world. In our nation at the moment, the issue of the moment is Brexit. Whichever way we voted, do we find it easy to respect those who voted the other way?

How often do we find ourselves making assumptions about people? Hearing the voice in our head which says, "well you would think that, wouldn't you?" What are the things that can cause us to make snap decisions about individuals or groups of people? Clothing? Accents? Job?

When Nathanael jumps to a conclusion about Jesus, Philip invites him to "come and see." To spend time with Jesus. To get to know him. To see him for who he really is, not who Nathanael might assume him to be. The call to love our neighbours extends far and wide. And the best way to love is

to get to know and understand people. To dare to see the world from their perspective. To allow our own views and preconceptions to be challenged. It's not about giving up on what we believe, but rather about letting the other in.

In the first session we talked about the triangle of God, self and neighbour. It's important to know ourselves, because an appropriate confidence in ourselves allows us to reach out to others without fear of losing our own identity. Loving ourselves is not a barrier to loving God and neighbour, but part of it.

### **Luke 18:9-14**

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

There is something in human beings that leads us into comparison. And once we compare, it isn't long before we start to make judgements. To wonder where we are in the hierarchy. Who we're better than; who we're worse than. It's not God's way, and it's a barrier to relationship – relationship with God and relationship with one another.

When we come before God in prayer, we need to come as ourselves. Without fear, and also without illusion. Only then can we be truly open to receive God's love and to hear God's call. When we do that, we can allow our relationships to be equally open. To realise that love need not be conditional and that love for one person does not preclude love for another.

We are all sinners, yes. And we are all also fearfully and wonderfully made. The more we can see as God sees, with eyes filled with love, the better our relationships will be and the more likely we are to avoid rushing to judgement.

### ***Were you there when they crucified my Lord?***

### **Session 3 – humility and self-criticism**

Relationship and reconciliation are in the nature of God and we are called into relationship, with God and with one another. Yet, as we have discovered, things get in the way. There are aspects of our human nature which can lead us into prejudice and judgement, rather than love and relationship. We are made in God's image and there is a way back. It is possible for us to find ways to avoid the dangers of we explored in the last session, and part of our return to relationship lies in humility and a healthy self-criticism.

### **John 8:1-11**

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

We have explored some of the ways in which we can tend towards exclusion and "othering" – and surely the story of the woman caught in adultery is just such an example. We are told that part of the motivation of the scribes and Pharisees is to test Jesus, but they have chosen an easy target. It takes two people to commit adultery, but it is the woman who bears the blame. It is the woman who becomes the other. It seems that, if nothing else, everyone can place themselves in a position of superiority when set alongside this woman.

Jesus refuses to play the game. He calls for self-examination. Instead of spending our time and energy looking for the failings in others, far better to look to ourselves. To recognise that sin is not something committed by others, but something committed by us all. Jesus is not asking for self-flagellation, but rather he is showing us that judgement of others is not our role. Far better to take time to build relationship. To grow in self-knowledge; to grow in love for God; to seek to love one another more.

### **Luke 10:25-37**

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

I wonder if the question on our lips is sometimes the same as that of the lawyer? If we are called to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves, who does that actually mean we have to love? What is our calling? It may not be that we are seeking to test God, but perhaps more a desire to know what success might look like. How can I know that I have followed the commandments?

Characteristically, Jesus isn't interested in helping us to tick the boxes. Why is it, I wonder, that we seem so wedded to a box-ticking mentality? League tables, statistics and questionnaires abound, giving us the sense that everything must be measurable.

I wonder how many targets the Samaritan missed that day, when he chose to help the man who had been left half dead at the side of the road? Whether he was late to a meeting. Or missed a deadline. Or a key performance indicator. Whether he would be considered to be working efficiently.

What does it mean that we are called to love our neighbour? It means that we need to cast our net wide. Our neighbour can and must be anyone. Those who are near and those who are far. Those who are like us and those who are not. Those we like, and those we do not. The implication of this story is that there need not be any limit to those we might call our neighbours. We were made to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. That means building a whole lot of relationships.

### **Matthew 20:20-28**

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.' But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.'

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

What is it about hierarchies that we find so compelling? Why is it that we are drawn to be better than others? We may well want to distance ourselves from this story. We wouldn't be like that, would we? We wouldn't be asking for preferential treatment for our children. Fairness, that's all we ask. No wonder the ten were angry.

But the humility that Jesus speaks of really does challenge us. This isn't just about a level playing field, it's about a life of service. Just think about Jesus washing his disciples' feet. That is the model we are talking about. Humility is rarely something that comes easily, but it is something we can practise. It's not about being a doormat, or considering ourselves inferior to others. But it is about being prepared to serve others, to make sacrifices, to live out a life of gracious generosity – with everything we have.

## **John 9:1-7**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

Are we blind or do we see? Our self-examination should take account of our blind spots. There are so many stories of healings in the Bible, and some of the most powerful are about people regaining their sight. It takes nothing away from the miracle of healing to recognise that there are many ways that we can be blind. Often Jesus himself will play around with the idea of blindness. Is it the person who does not have physical sight who is blind, who fails to see, or is it someone who can physically see everything, yet fails to understand? We are born to live in relationships with God another, yet there are things that get in the way. Learning to see clearly can help us back into relationship and reconciliation.

## ***I waited for the Lord - Mendelssohn***

### **Session 4 – radical openness to the other**

Relationship and reconciliation are in the nature of God and we are called into relationship, with God and with one another. Yet there are aspects of our human nature which can lead us into prejudice and judgement, rather than love and relationship. We are made in God's image and there is a way back which lies, in part, in humility and a healthy self-criticism, as we explored in the last session. It also calls for a radical openness to other people.

In this final session, we are going to recall familiar stories which challenge us to consider how far our relationships might extend; who we might welcome. Each one also challenges us to discover more about the God we worship. To be confronted once again by the ways Jesus defied the expectations of his time to show love to everyone; who spoke of a God whose love is stronger than anyone's hatred; whose generosity speaks of abundance, not scarcity. And then we will return to where we began. To the foot of the cross, that reminder that we are rooted in God, called to reach out to one another.

## **John 4:7-15**

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water

gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Many of us seek to avoid conflict. It’s understandable – and of course some conflicts may be best avoided. But once a conflict has arisen, it is never going to be resolved without people taking steps towards one another. The conflict between the Jews and Samaritans was centuries old. It comes up from time to time in the Gospels, that reminder of people set against one another. Jesus did not have to go to Samaria – he could have avoided the potential for conflict. But that is not the decision he makes.

Jesus takes a step towards the other. More than that, he engages in an active dialogue. Simply by doing so, he makes it possible for barriers to be broken down; for relationships to be restored. It’s not easy. There is risk involved. Risk in how he will be received; risk in how he will be perceived by his own community. But while our uniqueness is God-given, an unhealthy focus on difference, on pitting ourselves against one another, is not.

When conflicts arise, it is hard to take a step towards the other. But healing requires it. Our own flourishing is dependent on the flourishing of others. If we don’t take that step, we diminish ourselves as much as the other. This is what Jesus shows us.

#### **Matthew 20:1-16**

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

How often do we slip into comparison? Seeing ourselves in comparison to others? It’s interesting that in this parable, it is the element of comparison that causes the problem. The labourers who worked for the entire day would have been perfectly content with the wages they received, had it not been that those who worked for fewer hours received the same wage. It is the element of comparison which creates the friction.

Can you identify with that? A time that you have had a lovely holiday – until someone has decided to tell you about their holiday to somewhere more luxurious with better weather. Or a time when you

were quite settled in your working life until friends started to tell you about their promotions and pay rises.

If God is like the landowner in this parable, a God who is gracious, generous and loving, to all of us, there is a sense of equality in the way we are treated – God wants good for us all. And because we are all a part of God’s creation, we should be concerned about the flourishing of one another. It should give us joy to see this kind of generosity – it really isn’t at our expense, but rather seeks good for all. Can we see that? Can we feel it?

You will be familiar with the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son, who asks for his inheritance before his father’s death, squanders it and returns home. A parable that is equally about the elder brother, who resents his father’s welcome to his errant brother and refuses to join the celebrations. It’s a parable that will resonate with many of us. Those of us who feel we have strayed in various ways; and those of us who recognise those words, “it’s not fair!”

And if the father shows us something of God, we need to see that he chooses to cross the threshold twice in the story. Once for his younger son, and once for his elder son. If we are to be radically open to others, as I believe we are called to, we need to recognise that the call is to reach out even to those we find it hardest to reach out to. Those we feel have been given a better deal in life. Those who have followed a path that we find it hard to accept.

Standing at the foot of the cross, we recognise the connection between love of God, love of self and love of neighbour. They cannot be separated. Just as our own flourishing cannot be separated from the flourishing of others. And we also know that, easy though that sounds, the life of Jesus shows us that it is anything but easy. That while we are made for relationship with God and one another, we all too easily find ourselves in conflict.

Good Friday is a day to pledge ourselves afresh to building relationship, to reconciliation where there is conflict, and to reaching out to others. And to remember those familiar words from St. John:

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’

***Pie Jesu – Faure***

(Ideas from the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lent Book 2019, Reconciliation by Muthuraj Swamy)