

Self and other

Sunday 13th March 2011

STARTING OUT

Strangers and friends

Throughout this series we will ask about groups of people who stay under the radar of our usual networks and Christian enterprises, and are often hidden in plain sight in our families, congregations, communities and nations. We call them the 'Unreconciled' and we will examine themes which help us to find out more about the Unreconciled, make us more conscious of their presence and their needs and encourage us to take action to change their situation. The idea of the Unreconciled is particularly good for Lent, as we remember that Jesus's life and work, culminating in his death and resurrection, was to make us all aware of our Unreconciled state before God and was to change that forever by going to the cross.

The theme of 'self and other' asks us to think about how we form and sustain relationships. How do strangers become friends? What do we do when a new family moves in next door? What does it take to get to know new colleagues at work, new neighbours, a new class of children at school, a new boy or girlfriend, a new family, a new church community? Are there some people who are so different, so 'other' that we think twice before offering hospitality, a welcome into the family, or even friendship? Where do they fit in to our networks and webs of relationship? Are there people who remain 'Unreconciled' because we don't know how to reach out to them, or don't want to?

There are also some people for whom relationship beyond the self is also too confusing or frightening to manage. People with an Autism Spectrum Condition may find it a terrible struggle to make sense of the Other, and find our overtures of friendship and kindness bewildering or frightening. For some people with an ASC even a phone conversation is an exhausting or scary experience. People with Alzheimers disease or other forms of dementia may not recognise or remember the people they love and be terrified by 'strangers' who insist they are people they know. We can't assume that everyone has the same skills in making friends and sustaining relationships. 'People skills' don't come naturally to everyone. What can we do to make the lives of people richer who, through no fault of their own, can *never* reconcile the divide between 'self' and 'other'?





Also, when we enter into the season of Lent on the journey into the mystery of Easter, we are asked to confront that most extraordinary of relationships – our relationship as human beings with God. Who is this ‘Other’ who is God? Why is God concerned with human beings, with the universe? And how do we know God who is ‘Other’ and yet close to us, and come to understand what God is doing in the world around us? Each one of us has to work out how we relate to God. For some people that is the easiest thing in the world, people for whom a close personal friendship with Jesus, or a sense of dancing with the Spirit, sustains and nourishes their spiritual lives every day. But for some people, that relationship is fraught with difficulty; sometimes God seems to be non-existent, hidden or far away or to have abandoned the person altogether. For many people, an uneasy relationship between the self and God puts them in the world of the Unreconciled. For some other people in our society the matter of a supernatural ‘Other’ is an irrelevance or a nonsense. At the beginning of Lent, then, we can think anew about our own relationships with God, with Jesus and with his Spirit. What’s the difference between our understanding of life in Christ and those who do not know God in this way?

Find out more:

<http://alzheimers.org.uk>

<http://www.autism.org.uk>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/treatments/spirituality.aspx>



Activity

Choose from the selection below:

- Imagine life in heaven and list who you would like to see there. Who is not included in such a picture and why not?
- Think of or share holiday and travel experiences in foreign countries, perhaps by sharing photographs or a video. What was strange and unfamiliar about new places? What was it like to learn a language or make new friends?
- Imagine what it might be like to be locked in a room with a stranger. While you are waiting to be let out, what would you talk about to break the silence? What would you be willing to share?



Paradies by Giovanni di Paolo
(part of a collection of reproductions compiled by The Yorck Project)





GOING DEEPER

Becoming disciples

The first disciples Jesus called to follow him had the privilege of knowing him first hand. They travelled with him, learned from him, ate and drank with him, worked with him. So he was their friend, teacher, master, colleague, fellow citizen of an occupied territory and fellow worshipper. Even so, although Jesus called the disciples, drew them around him as a family and changed their lives, it took time for them to know him, to realise who he was and what he was asking them to do. They sometimes misunderstood what he was telling them, or had to ask for clarification, for help or to be told what they were doing wrong. So even for Jesus' friends, the relationship between self and other was difficult, even mysterious, and needed perseverance and love. Yet when Jesus was telling them that he was going to die, he promised his friends that the relationship would continue. First, through his death it would be possible for all human beings to be reconciled to God. That huge message would be for the disciples to convey not just by words but by their living witness, a witness which other people could see, recognise and respond to. Secondly, Jesus promised that for that witness his Spirit would come to be with the disciples so that they could have him with them and alongside them, always.

Research shows that people become Christians and are sustained in their Christian lives primarily through relationships with people who are Christian already. Just as Jesus put time and effort into telling his disciples and all those around him about the Father, so sharing Christian faith can reach out to those who struggle with the relationship between themselves and God. But sometimes we focus so much of our energy on those we think of as Unreconciled to Christian faith: the 'unreached' 'unchurched', 'unevangelised' or 'unsaved'. But what about those Unreconciled in our existing relationships – our families, friends, or people sitting beside us in Church? The Unreconciled don't have to be 'out there'; they can be among us and beside us, they can be lay people or clergy. We can perhaps even count ourselves among them, struggling to make sense of who Jesus is, just like the disciples.

Find out more:

Philip Richter and Leslie J Francis, (1998) *Gone but not Forgotten: Church leaving and returning* (Darton, Longman and Todd)



Photo: Lucas



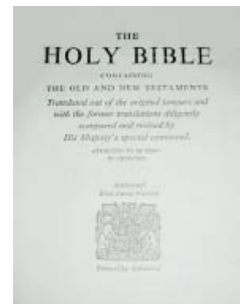
Activity

- Think of someone who has been important in your own faith journey – a teacher, friend, member of the clergy, family member or other inspirational figure. What impact did they make on your life and how did your life change or develop because of them?
- Think of appropriate ways of finding out who around us is having difficulties in sustaining their faith and think of how they might be supported. How can you support your local clergy, medical staff, teachers, police, and others with stressful jobs that can impact on faith?
- Find out about other faith groups in your area, perhaps through your local Inter-Faith forum and ask a person of another faith to visit and talk about what their relationship with God means to them. If you invite more than one perhaps that could be part of a panel discussion.

MOVING ON

Celebrating the Bible

Throughout this series, we have a central section celebrating the Bible. Although we take it for granted that we can hear Scripture read in Church or read the Bible at home, we may forget that that wasn't always the case for Christians. It is only from the time of the production of Bibles in English that ordinary English-speaking people in this country began to have more opportunities to know God through Scripture for themselves, either through reading or hearing it read to them, - a move from time to time resisted by both clergy and political forces. This year we are celebrating the most important and influential of those Bible translations. In 1603, King James I called a conference at Hampton Court to discuss a number of religious matters. This led to the production of the King James Bible, the 'Authorised Version', in the year 1611. Today, the Bible has been translated into thousands of different languages because of foundational importance of Scripture to Christian faith, and, through hearing the Word in their own languages, many people have entered into a relationship with Christ. Because 2011 marks the 400th anniversary of the KJV, passages for Bible study in these resources are given in both KJV and NRSV formats, with opportunity to reflect on the legacy and beauty of the KJV text.



Find out more:

www.biblesociety.org.uk

www.kingjamesbibletrust.org

www.biblefresh.com

Alister McGrath, (2001) *In the Beginning, the story of the King James Bible and how it changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (Hodder & Stoughton).

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all it's Worth*, Scripture Union Publishing 1994.

Tom Wright's 'For Everyone' bible commentaries published by SPCK.





Psalm 32

KJV

¹ Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

² Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.

³ When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long.

⁴ For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. *Selah*.

⁵ I acknowledge my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*.

⁶ For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found: surely in the floods of great waters they shall not come nigh unto him.

⁷ Thou art my hiding place; thou shalt preserve me from trouble; thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance. *Selah*.

⁸ I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye.

⁹ Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee.

¹⁰ Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about.

¹¹ Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.



NRSV

Of David. A Maskil.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;

my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Selah

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD',

and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Selah

Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;

at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of
deliverance.

Selah

I will instruct you and teach you the way you
should go;

I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Do not be like a horse or a mule, without
understanding,

whose temper must be curbed with bit and
bridle,

else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who
trust in the LORD.

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O
righteous,

and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.





This psalm gives us a powerful and honest insight about the relationship between self and Other, between human beings and God and describes those times when that relationship is close and loving and other times when it is not. The relationship is supposed to be one of loving openness and honesty about our problems and failings, we are not supposed to be chained to God like domestic animals.

Some questions for discussion

KJV only

- Read the text through and make a note of any unusual words or phrases or things you didn't understand.
- Pick out any words or phrases you especially like or find meaningful.

Why do you like them?

- Choose a phrase from this psalm and write it up or make a banner for your church to inspire others who come to visit during Lent

Any Bible version

- At what points in your own Christian life have you felt particularly close to God?
- At what points in your own Christian life have you felt that God was far away?
- What does this psalm tell us about the relationship between self and Other and how does it relate to our journey through Lent?

CELEBRATING THE BIBLE

Gospel

Matthew 4:1-11

KJV

¹ Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.
² And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.
³ And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.
⁴ But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.
⁵ Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple,
⁶ And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He

NRSV

The Temptation of Jesus

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴ But he answered, 'It is written,
 "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."
⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,





(KJV continued)

shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

⁷ Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

⁸ Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;

⁹ And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

¹⁰ Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

¹¹ Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

(NRSV continued)

“He will command his angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

⁷ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹ and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

These three stories of Jesus being tempted by the devil are very vivid ways of Jesus experiencing and resolving different ways of being God’s messiah. The story is set out as a dialogue between Jesus’ own self and an Other who knows all about what is in his heart and mind. Jesus was discovering who he truly was and what his calling in life was. He had to be clear about what his relationship was with his Father, but also what his relationships with other people should be like. The temptations come in both directions: he could compromise his relationship with his Father for earthly fame and power and he could use his powers to dominate and lord it over other people. Nor was this a simple choice because:

- He could use his miraculous powers to fulfil his own needs (although feeding the poor was a necessary thing in his day and he would then look like the ‘New Moses’).
- He could use his miraculous powers to gain fame and acclaim (but then people would want to follow him).
- He could use his powers to build his own empire and attain control over the world (but he could also liberate his land from the Romans).



Temptation of Christ by Duccio di Buoninsegna
(part of a collection of reproductions
compiled by The Yorck Project)





Some ideas for discussion

- Pick a temptation and - if in a group - have one person argue the case for not doing it, and the other the benefits to giving in.
- Have a look in a newspaper or magazine which talks about the lives of rich, powerful celebrities. How do their lives relate to the temptations and why do people like to follow celebrity gossip?
- How does the pursuit of self-interest, power, fame and control damage people and condemn them to live as Unreconciled groups? Who do you think are the powerful people in Britain and who might be losing out because of them?

Find out more

www.hellomagazine.com

www.ok.co.uk

www.nowmagazine.co.uk

MOVING INTO LENT

Following Jesus

One of the things Jesus wanted to do was to get people to see and recognise a common humanity in other people. It is easy to be kind and caring towards people we know and love, but harder to act on behalf of people we don't know, who are foreign to us, who speak and act differently or whose lives and customs we don't understand. He also wanted to make the point that we need to work on our ability to see the need and the good in others and respond to it, because by doing that we also affect our relationship with God. So, in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25.31-45), Jesus shocks his hearers by suggesting that his followers have neglected him, ignored him and failed to help him and so the relationship between him and them is damaged and broken and he will say 'I don't know you' in return. When the disciples protest that they have never neglected the Lord he tells them that everyone who is in need must be attended to, and if they are not, it is just the same as if he himself, the person they love, has been ignored and neglected. In other words, Jesus tells us that there should not be groups of Unreconciled people left adrift in our society and for as long as there are, we are not reconciled with him either. So in Lent, we should turn our attention to the Unreconciled among us, the lonely, those in poverty, those neglected, those who are sick, those whose faith is a struggle. Jesus is waiting for us to find him in those people in the hope that those people will find him in us.





Activity

- Make a plan of your street or look at your street on Google Earth Streetview and write down all your neighbours that you know and put a cross against those you don't know at all. Write down their names (if you know them) and rate how well you know them on a scale of one to ten, where ten is someone you regularly meet with and whose house you visit, to one if you have never spoken or you don't know anything about them. How well do you know your neighbours compared with a few years ago? Has anything changed? Do you know more people? Fewer?
- Think about some ways in which you could up the scores for people in your street that you don't know or don't know well. Set a target to up the score for three people in the next year by one point. Don't go mad and overwhelm people. Think about some ways you could offer simple hospitality, perform an act of kindness or do something neighbourly.

Rajinder

When the bin men come they always leave the bins in the middle of the road. My next door neighbour walks with a stick and it always takes him a long time to come out and get the bins in, sometimes he gets really wet when it's raining. So I said I would get his bins when I went out to get my mum's. It only takes a minute and he's really grateful.

MOVING OUT

Action in the community

Identify a group of people in the local situation or in the wider community who might be considered 'Other'. These could be people of another world faith, migrant workers, travellers or asylum seekers for example. Find out all you can about them and their way of life, their beliefs and customs. Then ask half the group to make a presentation acting as advocates for the Others if they want to use the church hall, send their children to the Church school, receive help or benefits from the church. Or you could do this as a panel discussion.

RESTING ON THE WAY

Theological reflection and prayer

An elderly woman put an advertisement in a local paper to rent one of her spare rooms to a female lodger. She was very surprised when all the people who replied were foreign students. She opted for a young woman from Taiwan who startled the houseowner by cooking unfamiliar dishes in the kitchen and meditating in the living room. As time went on, the houseowner came to look forward to the smell of cooking and was delighted to be invited to share meals with her young lodger. The younger woman also taught her to meditate using Christian prayer when she felt worried or upset so that she felt calmer and more able to cope. In return the houseowner taught the student to knit and helped her with her English.

Ask the group to discuss what we could offer to a visitor from another country if they came to stay in our homes on an exchange visit. What might you learn on the exchange?





Prayer

Lord,
 Help us to turn strangers into friends,
 Learning each other's language
 Knowing each other's culture,
 Finding out what makes them love, laugh, cry,
 Turn to us in time of need.
 Help us always to see the Other
 As a treasure house of riches
 Put there by you for us to discover
 And may they find treasure in us, too. Amen

DECISION TIME

What is going to change?

Now gather up your thoughts and ideas, and with these things in mind, consider these questions:

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to build better relationships with those unlike ourselves? How can we understand better those who find relationships difficult?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to reach out to the Other in our own situation and make the world around us more neighbourly?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify one reconciling action we can commit to which will help make the Unreconciled around us feel more included.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can we support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of this process and what difference should it have made?

Going further

This resource is based on the chapter 'Otherness and Self' in the book *Unreconciled?* where you can find lots of information, stories, and further ideas you can use for personal study or in a group, including more ideas for activities.

David Ford, *Self and Salvation: being transformed* (CUP, 1999)

Alison Webster, *You are Mine: Reflections on Who We Are* (SPCK, 2009),

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from March 14-17 offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to on the theme of order and disorder.

New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved."

Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 