

# Separation and Unity

Sunday 20th March 2011

STARTING OUT

## Long divisions

One of the problems with thinking about Christian reconciliation is that we tend to imagine it in terms of all the obvious things we know are wrong in the world and which need to be put right. The prayers we say in church often reflect this consciousness of the brokenness and damage there is in the world. We want to pray for big political matters like the relationship between Israel and Palestine, the war in Afghanistan, the damage done to people's lives in Iraq, the ruin we have made of the environment. We long for peace to come to war-torn places, unity to come to countries divided by walls of race, war, politics or religion. We want religious and political conflict to be resolved, communities to flourish alongside one another, those divided from useful life by poverty or disease to be raised up. We spend a lot of time on the divisions and difficulties and much excellent Christian work is done to further the goals of conflict resolution and reconciliation between estranged groups.

What's sometimes less easy to see is those situations where everything seems peaceful or settled or sorted out, but really underneath, resentment, misunderstanding, longstanding grudges, or just mismanagement is still going on. This can be where a political settlement has been reached in a country, but racial or religious tensions are still unresolved; it can be in or between different churches or religions; or inside congregations where there is an unfinished argument about where the church should be going. It can live inside families where grudges are held or divisive issues are not talked about. It can divide neighbours and communities and damage friendships and relationships.

In Lent, we approach an event where the gap between human beings and God is entirely dissolved. The things which separate us from God, - the inability of human beings to seek out, make sense of, and follow God's will, the evil that we do, the mess that we make of living and of being alive, all the myriad components of what we call human sin, these things are overturned by God at Easter. It is summed up in the famous words of John 3.16 '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.' Through Jesus, we do not have to be separated from God. Our final unity with God is assured.





In the words of the psalm set for today:

*The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.*

*The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and for evermore.*

### **Psalm 121 (NRSV)**

But that's not the end of it. The end of time has not yet come. We are living in this day and age now and that leaves us with a task. The task is to change God's world, to bring the divine qualities of peace, mutuality, love and flourishing to every life on the planet. How we see that task, and how we think those changes happen through our being and doing differs among Christian traditions, but what is certain is that we need to pay attention to the little things as well as the big things, the places where everything seems to be ticking along, but underneath something needs to be sorted, reconciled.

In this Lent resource for the second Sunday we will be looking at what Jesus did about it and at where there may be communities of Unreconciled people in our own local areas and situations who are completely overlooked.

## **Activity**

**Choose from the selection below:**

- Talk to people in your neighbourhood about where they see divisions in your community, or look at local newspapers to identify those divisions, or listen to local radio stations to pick up current issues in your area. Any there any issues you know about which your local newspapers or local radio stations are missing? Could you write about these to your local paper or talk to your local radio stations to highlight them?
- Think of stories of any people in your family, neighbours or friends who stopped talking to you, lost contact with you or fell out with you in some way. How did the separation happen and what did it take to heal the breach? What happens in those cases where separations never get reconciled?
- Consider where diversity adds to richness in the community. What is enjoyable about encountering different lifestyles, cultures, religions, etc? Are there occasions where diversity is too much to take in or cope with, or becomes confusing or even alienating?



GOING DEEPER

## A story: Chilean miners

In October 2010, the world rejoiced with the Chilean people when 33 miners buried deep underground after an accident, were safely brought to the surface. The miners had spent the first 17 days of their ordeal in darkness wondering if anyone knew where they were or whether they were still alive. After those 17 days a drill probe broke through into their space and came back with a note saying that they were safe, though separated from fresh air and their loved ones by half a mile of rock. Over the next two months, the miners had to remain buried beneath the earth while engineers worked out how to drill down to them safely, create an escape tunnel and lower a cage down to them which would bring them to the surface. At the surface, families prayed and kept vigil while food, water and medicine was sent down to the trapped miners. When the miners were brought to the surface, and reunited with their families, there were joy and tears as well as gratitude to God. The Chilean president was seen as a hero who never gave up, congratulated around the world on a fantastic rescue effort that united Chile and the whole world in solidarity for the cause, putting people before profit.



Photo: Hugo Infante/Government of Chile ©

**Watch on YouTube:**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-11534084>

## A story: a migrant community

In a large European city, a small struggling migrant community became established in a run down area. They bought several small shops and set up successful small businesses. With the profits they bought a plot of land and built a place of worship. Local people were very pleased with the shops and businesses and welcomed the now flourishing community and made many lasting friendships. As time went on, the migrant community brought in other people from abroad and moved them into the area. As this happened, and the migrant community grew larger, the relationships between the local people and the community began to change. Locals discovered that they were coming under pressure to move out. If they did so, the properties were bought by the migrant community. Some of the older locals began to be frozen out in shops by people they thought were friends. Some even found that their yards and gardens were being annexed overnight, with fences being removed or shifted. Locals began to feel isolated and lost and tensions rose. After a while, anger and resentment about the actions of the migrant community began to be felt outside the area, resulting in a gang coming into the migrant community, vandalising shops and torching cars.





### Some questions for discussion

- How do you think the miners felt when they realised they were trapped?
- How do you think the miners' families felt when they heard about the accident?
- Think about the co-operative effort needed to get the miners out safely. What do you think the role of faith was in sustaining the people involved?
- How do you think the migrant community felt when they first settled in the city?
- How do you think the locals felt as time went on?
- Which community do you think felt most threatened by the other?
- What do you think could have been done to prevent the situation deteriorating?
- Who are the 'buried' or 'trapped' people in your own community?

## Activity

Have a look at this material from Contemporary Christianity (formerly the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland)

Contemporary Christianity exists to help Christians and churches in Northern Ireland effectively serve Christ in our changing world.

Profound changes in culture have swept through Europe in recent years. Christians, like most of the general population, have been bewildered by the pace of change and have found themselves struggling to live authentically in a post-Christian society. In Northern Ireland we have particular issues to address.

### Mission

We are committed to developing the knowledge and personal skills needed among Christians and churches to serve their communities at critical points of cultural contention, communal conflict and social change, by becoming a network through which they can access biblical resources and practical support.

### Vision

We desire to see the Christian community in Northern Ireland nurture a deeply-rooted and radical biblical faith. Faith is in a God, who in Jesus Christ reconciles the world, restores human relationships and is concerned for all of life and creation. Faith that gives us confidence to confront, change and shape our culture.

[www.contemporarychristianity.net](http://www.contemporarychristianity.net)

Think about this vision statement and consider what kind of vision statement your own Christian community could produce. What would be different about such a statement and how would it be relevant to the place where you live?





'Hands Across the Divide', Maurice Harron. Photo: mafleen 

MOVING ON

## Celebrating the Bible

In this year of celebrating 400 years of the King James Version of the Bible, passages are given from both the KJV and the NRSV. You can use which ever one you prefer.

### Genesis 12:1-4a

#### KJV

<sup>1</sup> Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy fathers house, unto a land that I will shew thee:  
<sup>2</sup> And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:  
<sup>3</sup> And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.  
<sup>4</sup> So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran.

#### NRSV

##### The Call of Abram

<sup>1</sup> Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'  
<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

### 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 passage and make it a banner or picture for your reconciling action commitments at the end of this resource.

#### Any Bible version

- What do you think are the issues of separation and unity in this passage?
- How do you think Abram viewed his relationship with God?
- How do you understand God's promise to Abram in relation to God's reconciling work in the world?





CELEBRATING THE BIBLE

## Gospel

### Matthew 17:1-19

#### KJV

<sup>1</sup> And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart,

<sup>2</sup> And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.

<sup>3</sup> And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.

<sup>4</sup> Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.

<sup>5</sup> While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.

<sup>6</sup> And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.

<sup>7</sup> And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid.

<sup>8</sup> And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.

<sup>9</sup> And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.

<sup>10</sup> And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?

<sup>11</sup> And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.

<sup>12</sup> But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed.

Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.

#### NRSV

#### The Transfiguration

<sup>1</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

<sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' <sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' <sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' <sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.' <sup>10</sup> And the disciples asked him, 'Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' <sup>11</sup> He replied, 'Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; <sup>12</sup> but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.' <sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.





(KJV continued)

<sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.

<sup>14</sup> And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him, and saying,

<sup>15</sup> Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.

<sup>16</sup> And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.

<sup>17</sup> Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.

<sup>19</sup> Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?

(NRSV continued)

### Jesus Cures a Boy with a Demon

<sup>14</sup> When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, <sup>15</sup> and said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. <sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.' <sup>17</sup> Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.' <sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.

<sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?'

The 'Transfiguration' of Jesus is the account of Jesus being confirmed in his mission to reconcile the world to God by going to the cross (see Luke 9:31) and of his being strengthened through his conversation with Moses (the leader of God's people from Israel to the Promised Land i.e. the one whom God used to deliver and form his people) and Elijah (the prophet who called wayward Israel back to loyalty to God in the ninth century BC). It is also God's confirmation of who Jesus is to the three disciples Peter, James and John. The 'cloud' is a symbol for God's presence.

In the story the three disciples are conscious of their separation from Moses and Elijah (who would have been their heroes). Earth and heaven, the exalted and the mundane, the living and the dead, the world of the law and the prophets and the new order which is to come, are all held in opposition through the vision. Yet Jesus, beloved Son of God and friend of the disciples, is the link between the two groups, as in the picture. He goes between them and binds them together. Similarly, in the story of the boy with the demon, the boy is separated from his community by his affliction. The disciples cannot heal him and restore him to his community, but Jesus can and does. Through Jesus, the unity and restoration we may think is impossible, is offered to us, if we hold fast, in faith.



Transfiguration of Christ  
by Meister des  
Universitäts-Altars  
(part of a collection of  
reproductions compiled  
by The Yorck Project)



### Some questions for discussion

- Who are your Christian heroes – saints, Christian politicians, writers, aid workers etc? What separates you from being like them? How might a vision of their lives encourage and help you in your own Christian journey?
- How do you think the disciples felt about seeing their friend Jesus with Elijah and Moses?
- The disciples tried their hardest to heal the boy and reconcile him with his community, but he remained Unreconciled and suffering. How do you think the disciples felt when they failed?

### MOVING INTO LENT

## Following Jesus

Jesus was well aware of the separations and divisions in his own community. All kinds of tensions and problems were prevalent in those days between different groups of people. The Romans were the occupying force and Jesus' community had to pay taxes to the Emperor and obey Roman laws. There were tensions between the religious elites like the Pharisees and Saducees and the ordinary people. Purity laws kept certain people at a distance, especially if they were physically diseased or mentally ill. And some other people groups were looked on with suspicion, avoided or generally despised.

So one of the most shocking things Jesus did was deliberately to cross the boundaries which separated the different groups. He challenged the enmity between his people and the Romans suggesting to his followers that they 'turn the other cheek' and 'go the extra mile'. He challenged his own religious elite, suggesting they were corrupt inside. He healed people by going out to the places where they lived apart from society and brought them back in, often making himself ritually unclean in the process. He spoke to a woman of Samaria, and rescued a 'worthless' woman about to be stoned to death.

But it is in one of the most famous Gospel stories that Jesus shocks his audience with the question 'who is my neighbour?' For in this story, a Jew is beaten up and left for dead and those whose duty it was to help him, deliberately separate themselves from his plight, leaving him to bleed to death in the road. But it is his 'enemy', a Samaritan, a person he himself would cross the road to avoid, who comes to his aid, tends his wounds and saves his life. This then, is a true neighbour – not the person you know really well, who you would expect to rely on in an emergency, but a stranger, a foreigner, who cuts through all that separates us to show forth a powerful, world-changing compassion and humanity. *That* makes the difference.



**The Good Samaritan by Vincent van Gogh**  
(part of a collection of reproductions  
compiled by The Yorck Project)







## Activity

Thank you to the kind man who gave me his tissues when I was crying on the Tube on Friday morning (Lauren, London) Metro 19/10/10

- If you read the free Metro newspaper, have a look at the Good Deed Feed page, or look in your local newspaper... Have you got any stories of people helping when you fell over, your car broke down or you lost something you later got back? Try to find some good news stories about Good Samaritans in your local community. Why not feed those through to your local radio station?

MOVING OUT

## Action in the community

Find time to attend a service or event in a church of another denomination. This might be a good time to do it as there are often ecumenical opportunities in Lent.

Compare experiences if you are in a group. Who did you meet? What was the service or the event like? What things felt familiar and what strange? Would you want to go back and why? Did you feel you learned something about Christian unity?

RESTING ON THE WAY

## Theological reflection and prayer

Thinking about the story of the Chilean miners (above) what do these words of Psalm 95 mean to you?

*O come, let us sing to the LORD;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!  
For the LORD is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.  
In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.*





## Prayer

Lord,  
 Help us to overcome our histories,  
 Our long ago memories of rights and wrongs,  
 The people we feared, the people we shunned.  
 Help us to see you in everyone we meet,  
 To assume that goodness lives in every person  
 And find beyond our familiar friends and family,  
 Neighbours of all kinds waiting to be embraced.  
 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 overcome long standing barriers between neighbours and communities?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to reach out to the alienated and Unreconciled people in our own situation?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify **one** reconciling action we can commit to which will help make the Unreconciled ones 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 Separation and Unity 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.

Kirsteen Kim, (ed) *Reconciling Mission: The Ministry of Healing and Reconciliation in the Church Worldwide* (ISPCK 2005)

Sebastian Kim, S., Pauline Kollontai, and Greg Hoyland, (eds) *Peace and Reconciliation: in search of shared identity*, ( Ashgate, 2008)

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from March 21-24 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 