**Ministry of reconciliation** 31/12/21 dkm

Read: Isaiah 53, 2Corinthians 5

Text: 2Corinthians 5:18-21

Psalms: 122old, 49:1-10, 32:1-6, 134a

When I fill out my tax form, my occupation is stated as ‘minister of religion’. Our church has traditionally had ‘ministers’, but this title is not so common today- people think we are members of parliament! Some churches have priests but we reject this title because a priest is a person who offers sacrifices. Most Protestant churches prefer the title ‘pastor’, which has the sense of shepherding a flock.

I don’t know of any church that calls their leader an ambassador, but the apostle Paul writes, ‘We are ambassadors for Christ’ (5:20). He was not only referring to leaders of course, but to all followers of Christ. We will look at this interesting title, ‘ambassador’, in our second subheading. Our first subheading is ‘Divine reconciliation’ and out third, ‘Double imputation’.

**1. Divine reconciliation**

The word ‘divine’ refers to God of course, and we use this word in the double sense of being reconciled to God by God, or by God through his Son, Jesus Christ. Our sin, original sin and sin we have committed by breaking God’s commands, makes us enemies of God. God hates sin and our sin separates us from God; unforgiven sin makes us enemies of God (Isa 59:2, Rom 5:10, James 4:4). Not many preach this truth in our day because people do not like be told they are sinners and enemies of God. They like to hear that God loves them, which is true but not the whole truth. In fact, we do not understand the nature and depth of God’s love until we understand his hatred of sin.

God’s hatred of sin means that he is angry with sinners, and that his wrath is upon sinners. Yes, anger and wrath are attributes of our holy God. We are all born in sin, and as such are under the wrath of God. Like it or not, accept it or not, this is your default position before God. We are as helpless as a baby when it comes to reconciliation or getting right with God. Men have devised all manner of ways by which they hope to get right with God, as seen in the various religions. All these efforts and religions involve man taking the initiative in reconciling himself to God- all except one. The one exception is the gospel preached by the apostles. In this gospel it is God who comes down to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, in order to reconcile us to himself.

‘God demonstrates his love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8). The following verse in Romans 5 speaks of being saved from wrath through Him, through Christ. The word propitiation, ‘propitiation by His blood through faith’ (Rom 3:25), includes this truth of wrath being turned away and of enemies becoming friends, and indeed becoming one.

‘In Christ’, in the blood of Christ, God has reconciled us to himself, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (5:18). Clearly, if we were not enemies we would not need to be reconciled. And if we did not need to be reconciled to God there was no need for the cross. The world does not understand what the cross is all about because it does not accept our sin against God. Moreover, some Christians take the cross as a token of their religion without understanding it as the basis for their reconciliation and salvation.

The apostle is writing this letter to the church in Corinth, and especially to those continuing in the true gospel that he preached to them. So when he writes of God reconciling ‘us to himself through Jesus Christ’ he is referring to all believers (5:18). And so when he writes, ‘has given us the ministry of reconciliation’ he is referring to all believers, to all who are a new creation in Christ (5:18). The word ‘ministry’ is related to being ministers of course, as we discussed previously. We are ministers of the gospel rather than ministers of religion, and more to the point, ‘ministers of reconciliation’.

Is there a ‘ministry of reconciliation’ in the federal government? If so, the focus will be on reconciliation with indigenous people not with God. Yet for indigenous people, and for all people, reconciliation with God is of first importance. All human beings, no matter what race or religion, are cut off from God by sin, and by the grace of God people from all races and religions are being reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. The word ‘minister’ is ‘*diaconia’* in the Greek and means ‘one who serves’, not ‘one who lords it over others’.

The apostle Paul gave his life to ‘the ministry of reconciliation’. He was not elected by men but appointed by God himself. He was compelled by the love of Christ and the fear of the Lord, to preach and persuade people to confess their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose blood God was ‘reconciling the world to himself’ (5:19). The word ‘*kosmon*’ translated ‘world’, in this context means the world of human beings. It means people from all nations, races, tribes and languages will be reconciled to God; not in totality but according to God’s purposes in election. It means there is only one way of being reconciled to the God who created us, and who will judge us. That way is in and through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

‘Not imputing their trespasses to them’ (5:19). What does this mean? Trespasses or sins are offences against God, offences which incur the wrath of God. But in Christ, God’s wrath is turned away; it is turned upon Christ who took our sin upon himself as he hung on the cross. ‘Impute’ means to ‘reckon’ or to charge to someone’s account. God does not reckon our sins to us but reckons them to Christ. This is the great exchange that took place on the cross, as set out in verse 21. And this is the good news or the gospel that you are hearing, the word of reconciliation in and through the blood of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**2. Duty as ambassadors**

Not so long ago the French withdrew their ambassador to our country in protest against the cancelling of a government contract. The ambassador has since returned. He resides in our country as representative of the nation of France. Most countries have an ambassador in Canberra, and we have ambassadors living in their country. Such men or women have the task of promoting peace between our nation and other nations. If that other nation is very powerful, peace may well be on their terms. In times of war ambassadors are withdrawn; the victor in that war will send an ambassador to the defeated nation to establish terms of peace.

Paul applies the word ‘ambassador’ to himself, and to all who are involved in the ministry of reconciliation. Yet we only find the word twice - here and in Ephesians 6:20. The Greek word is ‘*presbeu*’ which is closely related to the word we translate as ‘elder’. The role or duty of an ambassador is to represent the king or government who sent him, and to convey messages from that king. He is a messenger entrusted with conveying the message in a proper way. The message may have to be translated and presented in a way the people can understand.

As ‘ambassadors for Christ’, we are to present the message of reconciliation entrusted to us by God, and to do so by way of pleading for acceptance. ‘We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God ‘(5:20). God sent Jonah as an ambassador to the wicked people of Nineveh to tell them, to implore them, to turn from their wicked ways. Jonah ran away, but God grabbed him and took him to Nineveh. Have you ever tried to run away when God sends you to someone or some place to be his ambassador? I hope the story of Jonah encourages you not runaway but to go and tell people of God’s wrath upon their sin, and of God’s love in sending Jesus to take their sin and die on the cross as their substitute.

Let no one be ashamed of the gospel. Let us plead, let us implore and beg on Christ’s behalf, ‘Be reconciled to God’. We do not want the death of Christ to be in vain, nor do we want anyone to continue as enemies of God and suffer eternal punishment in hell- do we?

**3. Double imputation**

We previously noted the richness of this chapter in terms of explaining the gospel. Verse 17 explains the amazing inner transformation of being born again, or as Paul calls it, becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus. His transformation was marked by a change of name, from Saul to Paul. You may not have taken on a new name but you will have taken on a new nature when you confessed your sin and believed in Jesus Christ. We urge you to mark this transformation by becoming a member of the church, but only God and you can know if you are truly a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Here in verse 21 we find another profound explanation of the gospel. The terms ‘double imputation’ and ‘great exchange’ have been used to describe the transactions referred to in this verse. The first of these transactions is, ‘He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us’ (5:21). Through his unique birth and unique life, Jesus was without sin. He is the Son of God, as well as the Son of Mary or Son of man. ‘In Him there is no sin’ (1John 3:5). Jesus challenged anyone to convict him of sin (John 8:46). Can you make the same challenge? Only a fool would do so, unless that person in Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus had no sin and therefore had no need to make sacrifices for his sin, a necessity for every Jew living under the law. Because every Jew and every human being has sinned, they are not able to a sacrifice for others. ‘None of them can by any means redeem his brother; nor give to God a ransom for him’ (Ps 49:7). You might be able to save your brother from drowning but you cannot save him from his sin: ‘To redeem a life is costly’.

The sin-offering under the old covenant had to be a lamb without blemish. The Bible refers to Jesus as, ‘a lamb without blemish and without spot’ (1Peter 1:19). Jesus ‘offered himself without spot to God’; ‘Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many’ (Heb 9:14, 28). Jesus, in willingly obedience to the Father, took our sin while on the cross; he suffered the wrath of God and paid the penalty due to us for our sin. He really died and was buried, ‘the just for the unjust to bring us to God ‘(1Peter 3:18). Yet death could not hold the Son of God and he rose again, signalling victory over death, a victory in which we who believe in him share.

The ‘double’ part of the imputation is, ‘that we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (5:21). Jesus took our sin and died as our substitute. The other side of the coin as it were, is that he gave us his righteousness that we might become righteous before God. This righteousness is pictured as putting on new clothes or a wedding dress which allows us to enter in to the presence of God. Without righteousness or holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Since we have no righteousness of our own, God imputes to us the righteousness of Christ, thereby making us acceptable in his presence.

And so reconciliation with God was obtained by means of the great exchange that took place on the cross. And so we rejoice with great thankfulness to the Lord, and tell the world of the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.