

Reconciled through the Cross: A Resource for Reflection and Discussion



“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation...” *2 Corinthians 5:18*.

In St Paul's writings, God is the reconciler. Christ's death on the cross brings about reconciliation. Reconciliation between God and humanity and between human beings is both an accomplished fact and a continuing process in which we are invited to take part.

So what does being reconciled mean?
To whom and to what do we need to be reconciled?

In the Bible forgiveness is a recurring theme which develops from being an act of duty to an act of generosity. This reaches its climax in the New Testament when Jesus commands his followers to forgive each other countless times and embeds this in the prayer that will identify his disciples - the Lord's Prayer. Nevertheless, forgiveness can be one of the hardest things to give and to receive.

Do we truly believe that God has forgiven us?
How often do we fail to forgive ourselves?

The Greek word 'metanoia' means: repentance, a fundamental change in character and way of life or spiritual conversion. This compound word combines two ideas - time and change – which may be described as 'after' and 'different' so that the whole meaning is “to think differently after”. A change of mind-set accompanied by regret can enable a change of behaviour.

In Hebrew the idea of repentance has a different nuance. It is represented by two verbs meaning 'to return' and 'to feel sorrow'. This combination of pro-active turning back to God and the emotional catalyst of pain over sin together facilitate the change that can emerge.

We are not asked to pretend that our wounds never existed but to acknowledge that they do not need to wound us forever. Similarly, we are called to reflect on the wounds we have inflicted on others and to consider any actions we may need to take towards reconciliation.

Jesus shows us that there is another way of looking at the same problem and of handling this complexity. His dying on the cross was the ultimate act of forgiveness because he was innocent, crying out: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” *Luke 23:34*.

Jesus forgives us but can we forgive ourselves or indeed others?

Activities for individual or group discussion.

Here are three different Bible activities on the theme of reconciliation.
They are suitable for both individual and group discussion.
They are flexible for you to adapt according to your needs.

1. Bible passages on the theme of reconciliation

Suggested time: 30 minutes to an hour for each passage and discussion.
End with a Closing Prayer of your choice.

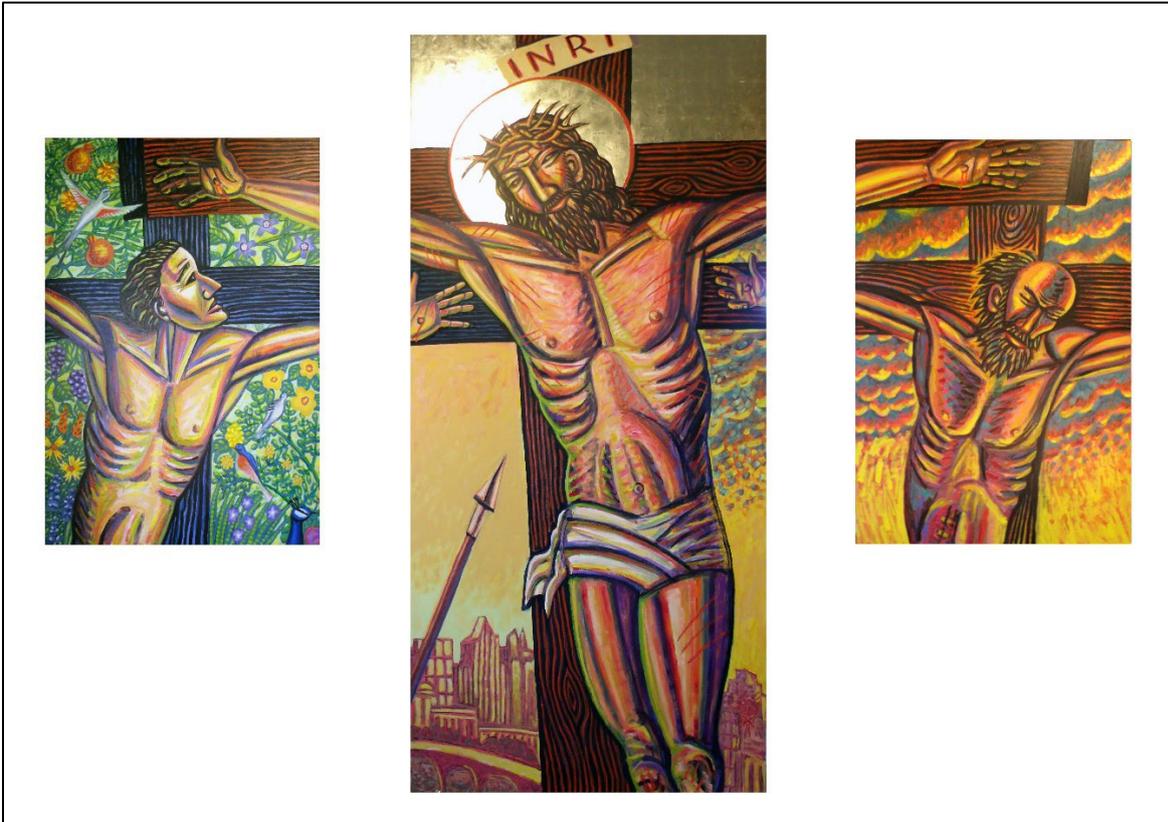


Joseph forgives his brothers after 20 years.

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, “Make everyone go out from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. *Genesis 45:1-5; 14-15.*

Questions for discussion

- What strikes you most about the different emotions in this passage?
- Are there people in your own circles of family or friends whom you have not seen in years? How would you feel if you saw them again?
- What does Joseph show you about forgiveness and reconciliation here?
- How can growing older affect the way we understand family relationships?



The Good Thief. James B. Janknegt. 2018. Oil on three panels, Texas. www.bcartfarm.com

The Crucifixion and the Good Thief

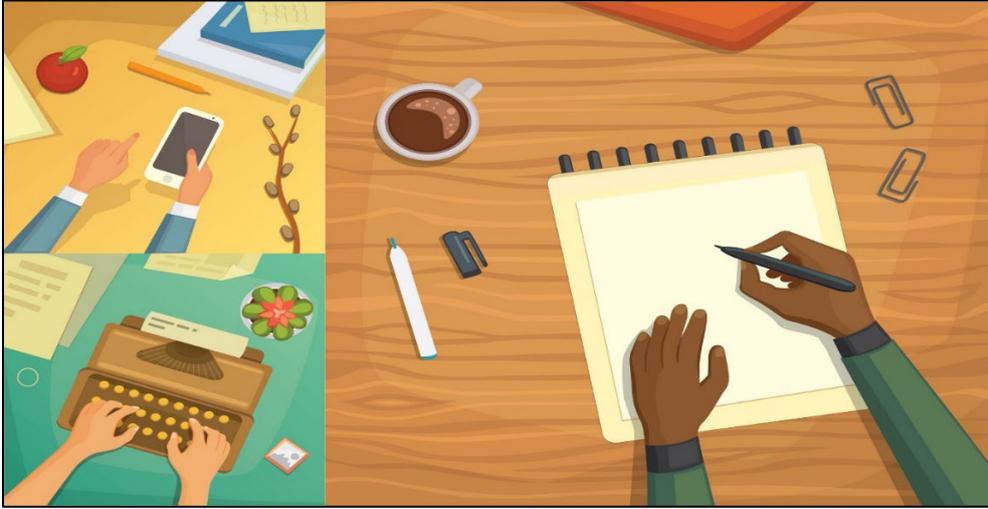
Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." *Luke 23:32-43*

Questions for discussion

1. How does Jesus' death on a cross shape your faith?
2. Has this changed as you have grown older?
3. Which words, images, symbols or actions in this text speak the most to you?
4. Do you have an image of Paradise and of being in Paradise?

2. Writing a letter

Suggested time: 45 minutes to an hour.
End with a Closing Prayer of your choice.



St Paul to the Ephesians

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. *Ephesians 2:13-22*

Paul used a very particular word for reconciliation in his letters which literally means becoming the other, we have to enter the reality of the one we need to forgive or whose forgiveness we seek. To put on their shoes. Paul wrote 13 letters to churches and individuals which form part of the New Testament and reconciliation was an important focus.

While technology has changed the way we communicate, it can be helpful to write a letter on paper to express our thoughts differently from how we do on a digital device. If you feel comfortable you may like to write a letter to someone (living or who has died) whom you would like to forgive or be forgiven by. You do not need to send this letter as the purpose of the reconciliation lies in the process of writing. Or you may just like to reflect quietly.

If you would like to write a letter, these points may be helpful to consider.

- a) Try to write on your own in a quiet place and in one sitting.
- b) Long letters do not enable reconciliation any more than short ones, nor does repetition.
- c) Think about what you want to express from your heart.
- d) Think about what it is that you want to forgive or for what do you want to apologise.
- e) Saying the phrase 'goodbye' in a letter is important - it helps us to move on.
- f) Keep your letter in a private place or destroy it as and when you feel ready.
- g) Hold this whole process and the letter in prayer trusting in God's loving forgiveness.

3. Parish or Community reconciliation

Suggested time: 1 – 1.5 hours.

End with a Closing Prayer of your choice.



This passage can be read silently or out loud.

A call to Christians to wear the virtues of Christ

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. *Colossians 3:12-15*

Prayer to be said together

Reconciling God,

Help us to let go of the things we cannot change so that we can move forward in freedom.

Help us to heal our wounds and allow ourselves to grieve properly.

Help us to help others to heal their pain by offering compassion to those we meet.

Help us to let relationships which are broken rest and recover in their own good time.

Help us to become more aware of the power of reconciliation in our attitudes and prayer.

Amen

Wider society

Within our societies and church communities there is a deep need and longing for healing and forgiveness. We can see shadows of darkness where pain, anger, intolerance and despair flourish. These shadows speak of cries for forgiveness and reconciliation - for healing within ourselves, our families, neighbourhoods, churches and communities. Forgiveness can begin to heal those wounds and bring reconciliation.

Our Faith Tradition

The Gospels are full of stories about Jesus calling people to conversion, healing the sick and offering forgiveness. Through Jesus, God seeks to reconcile us to himself. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us that we are loving people called to forgive and be forgiven. To forgive from the heart is never easy but the asking for God's gift of forgiveness and help is the start of the process.

a) What are some of the situations within your church or neighbourhood in which forgiveness and reconciliation would make a difference?

b) What are some of the things that keep your church or neighbourhood from choosing reconciliation and forgiveness?

c) In what ways can you make forgiveness and reconciliation a more central part of your personal life and the life of your community?

Action steps

- i) Discuss actions that can promote forgiveness, reconciliation and healing.
- ii) Start small so that your actions are do-able and within a reasonable timeframe.
- iii) You may like to start by holding a reconciliation service to prepare and receive forgiveness as individuals and as a faith community.
- iv) You could hold a second service later in the year.

Fleur Dorrell



*'They Carry the Cross' in the Catedral de la Prelatura de São Félix do Araguaia.
Fr Maximino Cerezo Barredo, CMF.*

