**More than Merely Human: Relationships Matter**

1 Cor 3: 1-9 Matt 21-26

Jesus came and messed with their Bible: “You have heard it said ‘love your neighbour and hate your enemy’, but I say to you ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’.”

Jesus didn’t just come along to add icing to the old cake ... He came with a **new** testament and **new** covenant. He came with a revolution that messed around with all that had gone before.

Today’s lectionary reading says:

**You have heard it said** to those of ancient times, ‘Whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.’ **But I say to you**, ‘If you are angry with your brother or sister you will be liable to judgment...

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.

Rather than turning the scripture on its head here... like he did for ‘an eye for an eye’ this time he is **intensifying** the meaning of the biblical text. Jesus is saying to his disciples ‘I want ***more*** than just not murdering.’ – it's being reconciled, dealing with anger, not just suppressing it.

I read recently:

People who are shouting at each other are constitutionally incapable of seeing the image of God in someone else (I thought that was really poignant in the current political environment)

Jesus took the law... and took it deep into the human heart. He *intensified* what it meant to live with God in the world... In a nutshell: relationships matter. What does that mean for us? Relationships on the internet matter (even if that’s a kind of oxymoron). More important relationships in the face to face community of Jesus matter. The Christian life is not easy. That’s not what grace means at all

The community of the people of God is not merely a place where people don’t murder one another ... although even that would a big step towards peace (if the Christians of the world refuse to murder one another in the name of their nations). The community of Jesus defined by relationships of reconciliation:

Paul says: If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, everything has become new! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ... and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... (2 Cor 5:17f) you know that passage well.

So you have a gift to take to the altar... you are on your way to church... the early Christians used to gather to practice Eucharist together and they would bring bread and wine from their own homes to share in the common meal of remembrance... and they would mix their contributions together for the libation ... from the best wine from the wealthy homes to the sour vinegar of the poor... and together practice and celebrate reconciliation... for Christians bringing their gift to the worship was itself a way of practicing reconciliation....

We say we’ve been reconciled to God and we come today to love and worship God. But, in the words of Chris Marshall at Passionfest last weekend: Have we been reconciled to a reconciling God? Becoming a Christian is not just being reconciled to any God. Have we been been reconciled to a reconciling God?

Often we emphasise being ***accepted*** by God. But it’s more than that. We are being reconciled to God... to a reconciling God. And to be reconciled to a reconciling God is to be led (spiritually empowered) in a process of becoming a reconciling people in our relationships.

Paul was writing to the Corinthians and they are a community with problems – there’s quarrelling and struggling among them. He says ‘You are still of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says “I belong to Paul” and another “I belong to Apollos” are you not merely human?’

Are you not *merely human*.... I was struck by that phrase. If someone challenges us or complains about the church, we say ‘We’re only human’. Why do you expect more of us? The church is full of human beings, it’s a refuge for sinners. And that’s true.

But it’s not Paul’s point. He’s not trying to ***defend*** the Christian community. He’s concerned to ***challenge*** it. When you quarrel and fight and fail to be a community of reconciliation... are you not merely human? In other words... Paul expects something other than the merely human ... God is doing something else... Paul is planting seeds, Apollos is watering but God is growing something which is not ‘merely human’. We are God’s field, he says, God’s building... signs of a new creation

Relationships matter for church...

I want to invite you to pause and think for a moment about two relationships you have... one you are grateful for that is going well. And another that needs some work.

pause

Relationships matter. But not just for when the community of Jesus is gathered... for as Bonhoeffer said from prison in 1944. “The church is the church ONLY when it exists for others.” We are being reconciled to God and one another **in order to** bring that ministry of reconciliation to others. The church, said Emil Brunner, exists by mission like fire exists by burning. How does fire exist by burning? Fire **is** burning. Church is that movement outward

Relationships matter not just for going to church (taking your gift to the altar) they matter when you leave the altar and go out those doors in mission to the world.

Recently I read an article by the poet and doctor Glenn Colquhoun. Glenn is a GP working in youth health in the Horowhenua and also a well-known NZ poet. It this article he talks about his struggle. In his area in the Horowhenua the median annual income is $18,500 (pause). You can buy a good house for $200,000. Maori are 20% of the population. It’s hard to see a doctor. Many can’t afford a $30 or $40 consultation, not to mention after hours fees. Once rent and power and phone are paid what is left is often less than $100. It’s true... in some social housing communities in Wellington its often considerably less than that. Let me read you an extract from Glenn Colquhoun: longish, but worth it... sit back

“There are not enough doctors to go around, so that those who are there are full and close to overwhelmed on any given day and need to create obstacles to seeing people. “You’ll need to speak to this person who’ll need to speak to this person who’ll need to speak to this person” screens the less persistent out. People often owe doctors money, which means they cannot be seen or are too embarrassed to be seen. Those who are acutely unwell struggle for an urgent appointment because these appointments are taken by those who are chronically unwell. If you do manage to see a doctor it might not be the same one you saw last time or the time before that because we are reliant on locum doctors to cover the gaps.

Doctors of course have a degree of complicity in all this. We are among the highest paid beneficiaries in the country. Our patients have spent a quarter of a million dollars educating us – the equivalent of someone being on the sickness benefit for 10 years – but often this means we simply leave the country to ply our trade somewhere else, or shift out of the communities we work in, so that the medicine we practise is bussed in from more affluent suburbs instead.

It can be easy as a GP to become locked into a death spiral. There are not enough of us and we are busy and our patients are complicated. We do not have the time to ask the questions we know we should and something in us flies away. All that is left to make the job slide down more easily is to be paid more. But this means that we need to see more patients to justify our wages, which means spending less time with them. Slowly but steadily we begin to price ourselves out of the caring market. In order to cope we consider ourselves consultants and introduce our patients to nurses who are cheaper and we become more unhappy because in all of this it is our patients who look after us but we don’t slow down enough to connect to them.

He goes on to talk about the stories he hears from his patients

David has lived in a bus stop. No matter how removed he is from that life now, he tells me he still wants to bring his children up in the same schools he went to. Not because they will give them greater opportunity but because he knows they will learn to fight there and become fearless. Fearlessness is an important value where he comes from. George was placed in the custody of seven different caregivers between the ages of three and four, a disruption that still haunts. Left alone in the house from 10 to 14, Aroha was continually abused by her stepfather. Stephanie’s dad buys synthetic cannabis with the allowance he gets for looking after her. There is no food in the fridge. Colin was abducted by men in a van at the age of seven and Sonia was raped at 10 by three men in a park.

These stories are real and relived and only a small fraction of those I have been told in the last few years. They are always central to the health of my patients and they are always open-ended and unfinished. They are rarely volunteered without some sacrifice and pain, and they often leave the teller raw and vulnerable. In short, they are sticky.

Medicine requires me as a GP to assess and refer these storytellers and sometimes to give them medicines, but more often than not they do not take the medicines and more often than not they do not get to appointments I referred them for. If they do get there then many times they do not know what happened when they did. They acquire labels they don’t understand, tell their stories to people they rarely see more than once or twice, and return to me less certain that big people have any idea what they’re doing. More tragically, they return thinking things haven’t worked so they must be the problem.

Societies are a collection of shared symbols and beliefs. They don’t work otherwise.

We agree that the law is the law. We agree that money has a certain value. We agree that people own things; televisions, cars, property. We agree that performing a certain job should earn you a certain wage. We agree that the country is the country and the government is the government. All of this floats on a cloud of assumption that over time has come to be unquestioned and forgotten.

Poverty in NZ is not really like poverty in Africa or in India and so it often ends up being argued about. In New Zealand poverty is really another word for inequality. And the problem with inequality is that it is a risk factor for disengagement. If you don’t think you have a shot at those things everyone else has a shot at, then why bother? In the young people I see who don’t go to school any more and who roam the streets at night and who huff butane or smoke cannabis or drink themselves rotten every weekend, it is this disengagement I fear most. Because it will damage them and it will damage you and me who still believe that the country is the country when one day the brink in the wall they beat their head against is ours.”

... says Glen Colquhoun

The country is the country... the system is taken for granted... and it makes it hard for a doctor, paid to see people efficiently, who need time and relationships, often more than anything else... a system which sets people against each other... and leaves many on a kind of disengagement scrap-heap of anger and resentment

This week a group of folk from this congregation are going to commit themselves to *unpaid time* with the people in local tenement flats. And they are doing it partly because they don’t take many of the things for granted... they have started to think differently about the country and the law and money and owning things. And they think differently because they are learning that Jesus is creating a different world... of different relationships, where things can be different. They are going to listen and learn and share... and see what Jesus does... cause Jesus does reconciliation and relationships matter.