

RECONNECTION IN A POLARISED WORLD

Acts 10: 34-36; II Corinthians 5:17-19;

Corrymeela Community Rededication

11 January 2026

Maybe I'm wrong, but I thought facts were supposed to be fairly firm. They were objective, widely agreed upon, regarded as reliably true until some paradigm shift occurred. Opinions, beliefs, on the other hand, were supposed to be fairly fluid: subjective, personal, susceptible to any new information. But it seems that in this world, facts are rather fungible: we choose the ones we want to accept; we marshal facts to reinforce our positions. And our opinions never change. Once you form an opinion, it is set in concrete. Indeed, we act as if loosening our opinions would be to abandon our principles and to betray our side. Any challenge to our beliefs is an attack that needs thwarted.

It's a polarised world. So many things we experience become an exercise in sorting. Does this reinforce my position? (Then it is good, and I accept it.) Does it undermine my position? (Then it is bad, and I reject it). If it strengthens my case – then it must be true and I insist on it. If it weakens my argument, then I can ignore it.

Or never even see it. Much of this sorting happens without our awareness. The algorithms we allow to curate our information reinforce patterns based on what we responded to earlier; the channels we set our antennae to filter out any contradictory noise that might muffle the clear signal of a simple message: we're right. They're wrong.

And as horrible, as scary as the death of Renee Good was this past week – what I found truly terrifying was how a divided people could view the same video evidence and quickly reach opposite conclusions. To some, the video evidence shows this mother, this good Christian woman trying to get out of the way when she was shot. To others it was clear from the camera's angle she was a threat, a domestic terrorist poisoned by hatred who resisted arrest; she put in danger an officer who was therefore justified in shooting her in self defence. What the truth is will be defined by which side holds the power to enforce the official narrative – and so holding power becomes the aim, preventing others from having power becomes our cause. Only might will make right so we have to stay firm to our positions, our side, our team. The facts won't matter. Opinions won't change. The truth will be whatever we say it is, whatever we need it to be to reinforce our position. There's too much at stake to entertain self-doubt. A state of affairs many in Northern Ireland might recognise.

And into this world, at this time, God is entrusting us as the Corrymeela Community with a message of reconciliation. How in the world are we supposed to do that?

This weekend, many of us gathered at the centre to consider how Corrymeela might help people on this island explore the hopes and fears rising from the prospect of a border poll. A simple enough task for a weekend! With the growing likelihood that this will come before the electorate in the next decade or so, we want (as a community of reconciliation) to enable better conversations, greater understanding, more trust in one another. We want to encourage relationships that allow whatever outcome comes about to be reached and implemented peacefully, and to be prepared for the consequences of either a 'yes' or a 'no'.

Yet the more we talked, the more sober we got. It became more and more obvious how complicated this project would be. Many of us grew more pessimistic about the willingness of voters to let go of what is (as imperfect as it may be) in the hope that an alternative could be better. We realised that even raising the question creates a dynamic of winners and losers – and

likely distracts us from more pressing issues. It was clear that we've lost a great deal of faith in democracy's ability to shape a shared future that works well enough for all of us. We became more aware of just how broken our systems are – how polarised our world is, how dysfunctional our democracies have grown as politics has moved away from the 'art of the possible' to the codification of power. It was at times, truly depressing. I'm sorry so many of you missed it.

Because I loved every minute. It gave me hope. Not that Corrymeela is going to come up with some marvellous solution or that the way forward has now become clear. It gave me hope because it was another sign that this broken, polarised, dysfunctional system of ours cannot last – and that enough of us are becoming desperate enough for real change to become possible, even inevitable. We are going to have to come to our senses eventually and conclude that we cannot continue on in this vein. Something has to change. We have to change. We will have to abandon our fixed positions, our preferred points of view, our unshakeable opinions and...compromise. And lose. Lose ground. Lose standing. Lose our certainty about certain things. Lose power. Only when our opposing poles lose their magnetic charge will we be able to reconnect with those we have pushed further away. Only when we let go of some beliefs we have held firm to will we discover what is actually true, what is actually holding us. Because if it is true, if it is real, if it is divine, it will not need our protection. It will be, with or without us. It's there. Reality exists. The question is whether it is good.

Above me, in the arch of this chancel are three statements that the people of Cooke Church (how many decades ago?) believed were so true, so unshakeable, so permanent that they could safely paint them in gold into the architecture of this space. God is spirit. God is light. God is love. What remarkable wisdom. What foresight. How nice of them to know I would need a sermon illustration just around now. What strikes me about this choice is that the saints of Cooke (ironically, paradoxically, wonderfully) chose as a permanent fixture a description of God as being unfixed to any particular point. God is not a rock in this telling. God is not sitting on a throne in God's holy temple. God is not an immovable object, a destination for us to reach and never leave; a pole on the good side of existence; the position from which we can safely judge other people. God instead is a spirit moving in the world, reaching people in need. God is light emanating out in all directions, a quantum wave particle: clearly present but with no fixed position. God is love, which we find not from a particular source, but in people -- with all the messiness and confusion and adaptation that implies. God is love – alive in honest to goodness human relationships that require compromise and loss, grace and forgiveness.

One of the exercises we did over the community weekend was to polarise ourselves. We all stood in the Croí and, depending on how we felt about a certain prompt – we moved to one end or the other. If you prefer cats, go to the far end. If you prefer dogs, come this way. If you prefer tea, over there; coffee, over here. If you think there should be a United Ireland... If you think this, that way; if think that, this way. For the most part, the exercise revealed an absolute mess. Corrymeela was all over the map. The one exception was to the question: do you think Corrymeela should take a particular stance on the question of a united Ireland. The clear consensus was NO, Corrymeela should not. The only exceptions were those who agreed that Corrymeela shouldn't take a stance but that not taking a stance is taking a stance and we should take the stance of not taking a stance. (You had to be there.)

But again...it was a moment of hope. A glimpse of another possibility, the possibility that people who clearly have strong opinions and preferred positions can choose not to be guided by a desire to win an argument or persuade the populace to a particular point of view – but to love

people wherever they are because God loves them already with them wherever they are, to love not only those who love Mary Lou McDonald but also those who love Jim Allister; to love only Renee Good who was killed but also Jonathan Ross who killed her and who is also a victim of a very broken world.

God is a spirit. God is light. God is love. And a community sent out into the world entrusted with God's message of reconciliation will be a community of faith rather than of certainty, will look not to defend a fixed position but to reconnect with people it may have pushed away, finding itself in places it didn't expect to be.

In the name of the Creator and the Christ and the Holy Spirit, one God: Amen.