

# WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

A GOSPEL  
REFLECTION  
PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA

THINK PEACE 6

The final chapter of the fourth gospel is a story of failure, encounter, metaphor, food, shame and comparison.

Peter is one of the particularly favoured disciples; his vivid personality traits are portrayed throughout each of the gospel accounts. He has decided to return to his previous profession. He has gone back to fishing.

Even in this decision, he is shown as someone with influence, because the six others in his company decided to accompany him. Perhaps he wished for solitude? He didn't get it. They spent the whole night on the boat. The seven men fish but their fishing yields nothing.

In the morning Jesus stands on the beach just after daybreak. He calls to them. It is less of a question, than an insight framed as a question. "Children, you have no fish, have you?" As yet they do not recognise him. Only when they acted on the stranger's suggestion to cast their nets to the right side does the identity of Jesus become clear, and Peter throws himself into the water and comes to Jesus.

Peter was naked - stripped for work it seems. He put his clothes on before jumping into the sea, a strange action surely. But it is one thing to feel raw and ashamed before someone you love and have abandoned. It is another thing to feel raw, ashamed while naked before someone you love and have abandoned. So, he covers himself before plunging into the water. He is not concerned with walking on the water now, he just finds the quickest way to engagement. The Hebrew word for 'naked' (gala) also means exile. Perhaps Peter the Jew wished to cover up his exile.

Peter arrives on the shore and finds Jesus already cooking fish and bread. Nonetheless, Peter hauls more fish from the boat, which has, by this time, arrived back to shore. They eat breakfast. The men who had brought the boat ashore; Peter who had swam ashore; and Jesus, who had called to them from the shore. Nothing is recorded about their conversation. They are ashamed.

The fishermen don't ask Jesus who he is, because they know who he is. Yet it is probable that they have another question. They know who he is, but perhaps they want to know what he is. They only answer they get is in the actions of the one who lived, died and is now resurrected. He is *for* them.

Now, three times, Peter is asked a question about love. He is standing around a charcoal fire and he is given three opportunities to talk of his love. These opportunities correspond to the three times he denied Jesus, which were also around a charcoal fire. Surely there cannot have been more than a week between the depictions of this denial and these discussions of love over the remains of a breakfast fire. The tortured and abandoned one is now standing, cooking around a fire, and speaking of love.

And here, we see some kind of reconciliation. The Latin word from which conciliation takes its form is *conciliāre*, meaning to unite in feeling or to make friends. To re-concile can mean to make friends again. Jesus has made the first move, he has initiated this encounter to kindle the embers of friendship. However, Peter's capacity to make friends with Jesus again is not dependent on Jesus' feelings towards him. Peter's dilemma is that he is caught up in the complication of his own feelings about his own feelings. Peter's feelings about himself were the barrier to the capacity to act on his deepest love towards his friend. Peter is awkward, asking questions about the other disciples, and Jesus, who seems always to have had a distaste for comparison, focuses Peter's thoughts on what is in his own control.

This intuition of this gospel story gives insight into the particulars of separation and reconciliation. The process of reconciling requires reflection not only on something someone else has done, but also on something we have ourselves done. To be reconciled with another is to be faced with the complication of our own thoughts about ourselves and our actions.

Our readings of the story of Jesus are often complicated by a hermeneutical commitment to finding him sinless and perfect. While on the one hand this can be an off-putting lens through which to explore the character of Jesus, we can, in a divided society like the north of Ireland, find wisdom in reflecting on it. So often, when considering the possibility of reconciliation with the other, it is towards ourselves that this lens of spotlessness, relative innocence and impeccability is implied, and toward the other that the lens of guilt, shame and avoidance is applied.

If we are to be reconciled each party must apply a lens of analysis to their own actions. This lens does not have to be only critical in its purpose. The lens of analysis can be wise, insightful, compassionate and it must seek to have integrity. Nobody can force this integrity of self-examination, and we must learn that understandable motivation is always secondary to action.

In our most intimate partnerships, we can find the most self-serving motivations. How much more so when the lines of connection between our tribe and a land-sharing other tribe are fractured with histories, stories of murder, stories of terrorism, hatred and sectarianism.

This is difficult, it is true. It is also, at times, unfair, asking much of those who are wounded.

In many conflicts there are innocent parties. In every conflict, there are parties who, while they may not be blameless, are certainly less to blame. It is also true that in many conflicts there are those who are complicit in fable-weaving about their own complicity, power-mongering and exclusion.

How can we know which way to understand ourselves and each other? It would seem that it is always wise to consider how another would tell the story of you in relation to the story of them, and then to practice the complicated art of telling each other stories, and telling each other's stories, in the presence of one another.

This is one way to discover the possibility of conciliation, reconciliation, understanding, insight or knowledge. It is not fast. It hurts. It causes pain for those who are already in pain.

I met a brave man last year. He described himself as a fundamentalist who was interested in exploring how his thoughts about homosexuality sounded to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Following a lengthy conversation, he posed a brave question. He asked “How many times, since we have begun talking, have my words bruised you?”

He was a man following the wisdom of asking questions about whether people’s experience of him corresponded with his understanding of his inner intentions. In response to my answer “I’ve lost count”, he gave me an answer of stunned silence. Rather than feeling any sense of victory, I found myself moved both by his honesty and his willingness to absorb the answer to the question I could not ask for him, no matter how much I would have tried.

And this is the crux of it. If we are to take it as read that reconciliation occurs where there has been a break in some kind of friendship or connection, we must find ourselves, somehow, in the presence of each other when we are each willing to ask of ourselves the question that the other most needs us to ask.

To introduce force to this equation is likely to negate the tone and spirit needed for this process to be fruitful.

The anxiety of Jesus seemed to be that many such questions are often wilfully ignored. He tried, and occasionally succeeded, to help people to ask the questions that they most needed to ask.

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