

SERMON PREACHED AT THE CONVENTION OF THE DIOCESE OF LOUISIANA

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away; see, everything
has become new!" 2 Cor 5:17 (NEW RSV)

The theme of the Convention presupposes a need to find a resolution that will enable harmonious working together for the common good of all. It assumes a prayerful petition for a situation that requires divine human engagement which will bring to bear a world in which God's will is done, as it is in heaven - our daily prayer.

If this is our perspective we therefore need to understand that the genesis of the ministry of reconciliation is at the centre of God's love for humanity. It is God's initiative that showed his redemptive work of love towards the human race which had been deceived to disobeying the Lord's commandments and therefore hid away from God. In the story of Adam and Eve we are told that God sought them back and provided for their basic needs. "And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them" Gen 3:21, because God would not abandon them but reconcile them to himself.

And the consequence, of course, is that Jesus Christ, conscious of the Old Testament and guided by the Spirit, put at the centre of his ministry the nature of God which is characterized by love for humanity-love that dwells in us, in and through Christ who is the new creation and in whom all things are made new.

My reading of the gospel is that God in Jesus Christ sought to amend the breached relationships between himself and his creatures - humanity that has separated from him through sin. Jesus therefore is the gospel of reconciliation himself for 'all things relating to our reconciliation by Jesus Christ are of God, who by the mediation of Jesus Christ has reconciled the world to himself.' In Jesus, the old passed away and the new emerged through his spiritual presence in those whose faith is in him...

God's work of reconciliation was passed on to us through Jesus Christ who gave us the ministry of reconciliation to be his ambassadors of the new creation in the world. Paul picks up the importance of reconciliation and places it at the center of the life of believers. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything become new...", he said to the congregations in Corinth which translates to us the new congregation in the world.

God's appeal to us, believers in the faith of Jesus is first, reconciliation with one another as he has reconciled us to himself through Christ, who is the means by which the believers are reconciled to God. One can not be in relationship with Christ unless one is reconciled with ones neighbor; thus Jesus says, 'So when you are offering your gifts at the altar, and *suddenly* 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 only thereafter come and make your offering' (Matt 5:23-25). This is a prerequisite for honest reconciliation.

The Lord's appeal to us for reconciliation is as strong as that of love about which he said, 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' Jesus did not ask us to love but commanded that we do so as he has done (Jn 15:12). This command is no less than the commission to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world of deception and conflict. And in Luke's gospel, Jesus emphasizes the importance of love by saying we must love our enemies and do good to those who hate us because there is no virtue in loving those who love us (Lk 6:27-36). love, it seems to me, is not a choice but an obligation for we were first loved before we even knew what it actually means to love - love is from God - it is God's initiative and we are but respondents to it.

The love of God that is revealed in the person and work of Christ is grace in action resulting in peace. St Jerome makes this connection in considering the famous salutation of Paul - "grace and peace". He says that the expression "grace and peace" sums up the saving work of Christ: "Grace, which is not a payment due to merit, but has been granted as a gift; and peace, whereby we have been reconciled to God, having as propitiator the lord Jesus, who forgave us our sins and expunged what was the handwriting of death against us, nailing it to the cross..."

So, my dear sojourners, as you reflect on your past and seeking renewed ways of correcting the past so that it does not happen again, remember that we - the believers have been called and implored by God through the grace revealed in Christ to be his means of reconciliation, for the peace that is beyond all understanding - the peace of reconciliation in Christ. In the light of this centrality of reconciliation to the life and work of Christ, Fr Kenneth

Leech, sees it pivotal to the mission points obvious in our text, that "the good news of reconciliation which has been accomplished in Christ, and the 'ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5: 18) which is a continuing work, are central to the work of the church." He adds, that in this act, God the very one against whom we have sinned, in Christ, has cleansed us from our sin "not by a legalistic payment, but by 'an absorption by the very God himself of the fatal disease so as to neutralize it effectively'.

Fr Leech's emphasis on the graciousness act of the sinned against absorbing the sin of the sinner as the ingredient of reconciliation is a challenge to all the sinned against when they come face to face with the gospel of reconciliation. It is a challenge because the gospel to forgive and absorb the venom of the sin committed against you is non-negotiable if we are to stay in peace of God's reconciliation - "If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mat 6: 15).

So, first we are to recognize and confess our own sinfulness and embrace our salvation through Christ's saving act that reconciles us, if we are to remain in relationship with him through those with whom we share the faith and have our being amongst them. Secondly to be reconciled with our neighbors, if we are to be truly reconciled with him. This is our calling - to be reconciled to one another as God has reconciled us to himself through Christ.

Your lives have been marked by the negative experience of racial prejudice, unjust economic system that benefited a few and left many in poverty. The recent floods have once again surfaced the ugly side of racism. As one of the historically sinned against in South Africa, I identify with the situation and experience of the racially sinned against in this context, even though our situation was worse because it was legislated by the apartheid laws designed to oppress and exploit the black people. In the nineties when those who had been incarcerated on Robben Island or banished to exile for political reasons were released, we could have revenged. In fact the world expected blood bath on the eve of transition but rather we sought reconciliation and celebrated our diversity (I will say more about this tomorrow).

Your experience, past and present, is not without hope. The important thing is how you deal with all that separates you as God's beloved children? Suffering is not only limited to the victim but the perpetrator suffers just as

much if not worse. Hope aspect I hope we are spiritually dead alive, and this should not be the case for us who believe in Christ Jesus our hope, of whom Paul says, 'hope does not disappoint us.'

Now hope requires endurance if we are to achieve reconciliation that will help us build a new society - a world in which God's will is done as it is in heaven. Our theme, 'Be reconciled to God' is an invitation to work for change and transformation of the world - rescuing it from the deceit of the devil. Of course we cannot do this without God the Holy Spirit whom we must hear crying out to us to be His presence in the world, so that as it was with Jesus, God may reconcile and save the world through us the believers. Simply put, his presence and work of reconciliation and redemption must be realized in the world through you and I, so that at the end of time humankind is able to assume His grace of which Christ said to Paul, " My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

Paul again, as if it is not enough, goes on to say, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God -not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Eph.2: 8-10). This is what it means, at least to me, for those who are in Christ and therefore new creation, for in Christ Jesus a new humanity is born by the grace of God and is the manifestation of Christ and the glory of the kingdom of God in the new and reconciled world in which His will is done as in heaven. This is a "new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and first earth has passed away....," in which Jesus Christ is seated on the throne proclaiming;" See; I am making all things new" Rev 21:1-5).

It is my belief that this is what the faithful are called to do in the world, 'make all things new' by living the gospel of reconciliation entrusted to us in Christ Jesus. This means speaking truth to power for the sake of peace and justice that must be actualized in our newness of spirit - illumined by the grace of God in our lives. The fundamental mission therefore, of all believers in the world is to carry out the mandate given to us by Christ, to "Be reconciled" as a practical way of witnessing to Christ's redemptive work of love for the salvation of humanity. We must remember that reconciliation is

God's initiative which we respond to his amazing grace of love by which we are reconciled to him and one another.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that our Eucharistic life and our participation in it obeying the lord's command, to 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Lk 22:19) is the manifestation of Christ's glory in the new world in which Jesus is enthroned and making all things new - a world in which God's will is done 'as it is in heaven.' A world in which those who are in Christ have been transformed into new creation-both the sinner and the sinned against, a world in which everything old has passed away and the world in which everything has become new (2 Cor 5:11ff). You and I are the means -the ambassadors by which and through whom, God is reconciling the world to himself, so that in him all creation might become his righteousness (2 Cor 5:21) - community that illumines God's loving kindness and goodness to humanity.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, as the Eucharistic community whose hope is in Christ who makes all things new, let us make a decisive decision at this convention-a body representing the community of believers, that we shall play a pivotal role and contribute towards reconciliation by speaking truth to power for Christ, and lead by example in the reconciling sacrifice of forgiving; for the sake of God's kingdom to which we are called to "Be reconciled." Amen

Jts/2/08

1. The letters of St Jerome, vol.1; Newman Press, 1963
2. Experience of God, Harper & Row, 1985