

## General Assembly Bible Study – Sunday 2 July, 2023

# A Space of Grace is a Space of Reconciliation and Peacemaking

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Yesterday we reflected on Christ's call to each of us and how we then as a Christian community seek to act on that call in our our invitation and outreach to others, creating spaces of grace in which transformation can take place.

Today we focus in a specific way on the call to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation. Once again I was really encouraged by the theme chosen for this bible study. Too often the work of peace and reconciliation is viewed as an optional extra for people who like that kind of thing, rather than an integral part of the discipleship to which we are all called.

This is one reason why, at this time of such turmoil and pressures on relationships from local level through to the global, the Church is perhaps not having the impact we would wish to see as a voice for peace.

Our Scripture passage for today invites us to once again imagine ourselves journeying with Christ, but this time on a boat sailing through stormy waters.

So as we begin it may help you to take a moment to identify for yourself some of the conflicts and challenges that concern and maybe even frighten you in the storms we find ourselves trying to navigate in the particular contexts in which we live and work and lead.

In 2010 I was in Lviv in Ukraine doing peace-building work in the Greek Catholic University, sharing experiences from our Irish context with the students there to explore what the lessons might be for Ukrainian-Russian reconciliation, which is sad to recall when we think of what's happening there at the minute.

But I mention it because the Ukrainian bishop who was on the panel with me spoke on this Scripture passage and he had a very interesting take on it which has stayed with me since then. He asked the group to consider how it was that Jesus was able to calm the storm, which seemed to me a very strange question — I mean, it's Jesus, what more explanation could you need?

But then he went on to suggest that Jesus was able to calm the storm because what Jesus brought into situations was peace in his heart.

And then he asked us to think about our own approach to situations of conflict and turmoil. Did we bring peace in our hearts, or did we bring a storm of negative

emotions and self-doubt? He challenged us to consider whether we were holding ourselves back from the call to be peacemakers with thoughts like 'I don't have the right skills, experience, temperament to do that...' One of his examples that stuck in my head because I think it cut quite close to the bone for more than a few of us was 'How can I make peace in the world, sure I can't even make peace in my own home...'

Then he invited us to think about the difference we could make if we could make peace in our hearts by saying to ourselves, I with all my faults and failings, with my impatience, my frustrations, my lack of knowledge... I am enough to do some good here.

Those words and that challenge have really stayed with me. And while, like many of us I would imagine, I can still often produce a good list of reasons why someone else would be better placed to take the lead on challenging peace-building work or sensitive dialogues, on those occasions when I can't get manage to get myself off the hook I do find myself going back to ask what it would mean to approach these situations with peace in my heart.

And I have found that to be really freeing because at the end of the day the only person you can control in an encounter, in a negotiation, is yourself, so better to focus on the intentions and the integrity that you are bringing into that space. In our Church context when we think about the qualities of good leadership risk-taking is often not near the top of the list, because we take our responsibility for communities and relationships really seriously and yet there's no other way to do peace-building.

So now I invite you to bring your attention back to the boat and to the fears and concerns you may have identified earlier. Do you find yourself approaching these with peace in your heart, or do you bring that storm inside also? If so, what could help you to calm that storm?

Now of course it helps to know that we are not alone in the boat. There are other disciples, fellow-travellers, and for many of us the image of the boat is associated with ecumenism and our relationships with other churches. Most importantly, we have Christ with us in the boat. Christ who is calling us to have faith.

This for me brings home one of the most powerful truths about our peace and reconciliation work. We cannot achieve true reconciliation without Christ, who brings the peace that is beyond our human understanding, but we still have to do our part and we still need each other.

And so from here I want to invite us to reflect on our collective witness as a Christian community to a society that is increasingly fragmented, scarred by deepening identity-based fractures. How do we think we are doing in bringing a message of hope and healing, of peace and reconciliation in our current context?

I'm often asked to facilitate faith-based groups in engaging with this kind of question, and so I just want to briefly share with you the four step process that I take them through in case it might be helpful for you.

My first question is always: As you look around you, at the work that is currently happening, what gives you hope?

Starting the conversation here has at times resulted in stunned silence or even a bit of a standoff situation where people were not receptive to a call to be hopeful — that wasn't the kind of meeting they thought they'd signed up for.

And I yet I persevere with this approach, because while in nearly every other context my first priority would be to push the Church towards self-critical reflection as the starting point, here I'm conscious of several things:

- firstly, you need to bring a hopeful vision into peace-building work, realistic but hopeful, if you're going to offer people something to work towards;
- secondly, we are really poor at institutional memory in the Church, good initiatives vanish without trace, we fail to integrate the learning, and in the process we can demoralise and alienate leaders that we desperately need, so I make people go back and think of the contributions that they need to acknowledge before going on to the next thing;
- Lastly, we have to think about the younger generation of leaders and recognise that if we take the self-critical analysis to the extreme of saying everything is disappointment and failure, what we are then effectively saying to young people is you'd better take your skills and passion and your leadership somewhere else, because there's nothing worthwhile for you to do here.

So hopefully by the time we've fought our way through that exercise we have injected some hope and encouragement into the discourse. We don't have time to do the exercise here now but if we did I think we can very easily come up with a good list from what we've heard already: we've seen evidence of a Church with a concern for and commitment to those impacted by poverty, people seeking asylum, people impacted by conflict in different parts of the world.

We've seen a Church with a heart for the community, that takes seriously its commitments to racial justice and other aspects of inclusion, that is facing up to the wrongs of the past and current injustices in areas such as the unequal impact of climate breakdown.

So I suggest there is a lot to build on here and that's without going into any kind of detail or depth.

I then ask groups to identify the priority needs they could and should respond to. The work of reconciliation has to be grounded in the concrete and complex

realities of people's every day lives, so we have to engage seriously with the needs that are out there if we're to make a real impact. It can't just be about what we want to do.

An important part of this exercise is recognising that the Church doesn't have to do everything, won't be best placed to lead on many things, and should do things in partnership where possible.

Then I invite people, having discussed the resources and experiences they have to build on, and the needs they seek to respond to, to identify what may be holding them back.

At this point I give people full permission to be negative and name limitations, rather than trying to reframe them as "exciting opportunities for growth" because it's about authenticity not a tyranny of optimism, or papering over the cracks. Yesterday we talked about the power of truth telling and just being able to name their concerns honestly generally helps people feel less stressed and frustrated, even when there are no easy answers.

The kinds of things that frequently come up in this space will not be a surprise to you: it's the lack of resources, missed opportunities to collaborate, insecurity or uncertainty in navigating relationships (often ecumenical or inter faith relationships), lack of support for skills development, lack of support for those in leadership and that pressure of just keeping going.

The final stage is to help them to identify the supports and resources that might help them better achieve their objectives.

From my work I would say that there is a wealth of under-developed capacity in our churches, at all levels, for peace and reconciliation work that is so badly needed at present. Yes, there are clear issues of resources, but there are also questions around what we prioritise, and there is a significant challenge in terms of confidence.

In CTBI one of the immediate priorities we have identified in building that confidence is to deepen our theological reflection on these issues, because we seem to have formed the opinion that we have to be perfect, be above reproach or have all the answers to give leadership in the work of peace. Perhaps we're saying to ourselves 'How can we bring peace to the world if I can't even bring peace to our own church family?' And yet the Church has so much more to offer society from the position of a wounded healer, who journeys alongside.

I recently had the very difficult and yet privileged experience of spending time in Liberia, supporting the Catholic bishops there in initiating a reconciliation outreach programme, twenty years after the end of a series of brutal civil wars. The German Catholic bishops had offered several times to bring them a group of experienced

peace-builders from different contexts to support them in this work, and the Liberian Church had declined the offer multiple times. They were struggling every day with a deep social and economic crisis and they didn't want outsiders coming in, poking at their wounds and then going on their merry way, but eventually they gave in, very reluctantly, and agreed to a programme of deep reflective dialogue, involving engagement with victims and survivors, armed actors, and peace actors.

At the end of a week in which we shared many tears, and opened up about our challenges in our different contexts, they were so grateful. They said, 'We thought you were coming to lecture, but instead you came to listen.'

Sharing our wounds, helping to carry one another's burdens, this for me is what it means to be in a space of grace that is a space of reconciliation and peace-making.