

On the Cross : what's God up to ... caught in the middle SPH, Maundy Thursday 2008

On the cross: what's God up to? One very dramatic way people have of answering this question is to say that it's a humungous fight against the powers of evil in the world; Jesus is involved in a ding dong battle between God and the devil, caught in the middle, you might say. And if you like drama, it's very appealing.

But it's not the only way of understanding tonight's catch phrase: One the Cross, what is God up to...caught in the middle? Here's one small sentence of 23 words (in English) which is at the heart of it all for me, and contains the entire gospel from Christmas to Easter to us.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding anyone's faults against them, but entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

God was in Christ. Jesus is, as it were caught, in the middle between us and God. "He's just a man, another man, and I've had so many men before, he's only just one more" sings Mary Magdalen in Jesus Christ Superstar.

And those twentieth century words reflect a very common contemporary view of Jesus – though, of course, there have been people in every age, who have thought that way.

But as Christians we don't. *God was in Christ*; uniquely, totally. Christ represents God to us, and us to God, for God became one of us in Jesus Christ. That baby whom we so easily sentimentalize at Christmas is both God and a human being, God emptying himself of all divine attributes in order to be as we are; yet still being *God* in human form. So it is God made one of us whom we crucify. Caught in the middle.

Now look at the cross from God's perspective, and ask: what's God up to? There's two sides to it. God is making God no longer opposed to us, and us no longer opposed to God. We nearly always see it the second way. It's easy seeing ourselves as the objects of God's reconciliation. We can why it's needed. We can see Jesus caught in the middle, absorbing all our anger and hate and rage and rejection; and we can be amazed that in this way, accepting the worst we can do to him, God has reconciled us.

We must try looking at it in the first way too. Because at the same time God was alienated from us almost as much as we were alienated from God. The stretched out the arms of love say God is no longer alienated from us, say God's eyes are ever searching, God's arms are ever open, like the eyes and arms of the prodigal's father. God is breaking down the barrier that we might well have expected God to raise because of our wilful waywardness.

But when we say 'I've become reconciled to that', we're also recognizing that being reconciled can be about acquiescing in something, possibly something unpleasant. On the cross, God in Christ-caught-in-the-middle acquiesces in something very unpleasant. But no cross, no salvation. God reconciles himself to reconciling us on the cross. And Jesus reconciles himself to being the agent of reconciliation on the cross.

Reconciliation's also about restoring friendship, re-establishing good relations between two or more people. Look at the cross this way, and you'll find that the overtones of revulsion, the feeling of horror at what the other has done, or of what you have done to the other, have gone. To become friends once again is hugely positive.

And what can be more blessed than to be God's friend? Friendship is a very precious thing. We lose sight of it in our God-relationship if we become too obsessed with God's might or otherness or kingly rule. On the cross God is calling out to be our friend, and for us to be God's friends. As God and human beings meet in Jesus, so the estrangement is rolled back,

the true relationship is re-established.

Reconciling settles quarrels. And quarrels are not all one way things. There's much in the Bible, especially in the prophets, which suggests that God has plenty of quarrels to pick with us – more, perhaps, than we have with God. In fact, we often tend to walk away from the quarrel with God, by pretending God's not there, or that God doesn't actually want certain things from us, or that friendship doesn't carry responsibilities with it. As God made flesh, Jesus settles the quarrel, but only through the inevitability of being the one caught in the middle, the one on whom all the blows land. But God could do it no other way than by becoming one of us. *God was in Christ reconciling.*

When we reconcile we can also be bringing two apparently conflicting things together and making them compatible with each other.

Many people struggle to find any compatibility between the apparently senseless acts of our fellow human beings and the idea of a God of love.

But it's equally difficult when the things in conflict are God's will and my will. Yes, God's will is sovereign. But God's will won't prevail unless there is a meeting point between God's will and mine.

And it's no use God imposing his will on me, for that is forced and false, no real meeting. It is only when I realise that *I'm* caught in the middle and have to surrender to God in love that there is reconciliation, that I am made compatible with what God wants. And I can only lovingly surrender when I see God's love for me in Jesus' blood flowing down the wood of the cross. "Prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ" says St Benedict; and that loving is made possible only because "there is no wood like the wood of the cross for lighting the fire of love in the soul".

The final upshot of God being in Christ reconciling the world to himself is this, that God doesn't holding anyone's faults against them. Sometimes I can't get my head round that: why shouldn't my Lord hold my faults against me, faulty and unlovely as I am? It is the amazing message of reconciliation that he doesn't.

My song is love unknown
my Saviour's love for me,
love to the loveless shown,
that they might lovely be.
Oh who am I
that for my sake
my Lord should take
frail flesh and die?

It hurt Jesus to show that love to the loveless, to be caught in the middle of love and non-love. Sometimes it hurts us to be Christian, because we are entrusted with the message of reconciliation, and might also get caught in the middle, as we take the message to the world.

But we cannot be Christians without taking that risk, without being touched by the love of God, without being radically transformed by the reconciling love of God, nor without taking that love with us wherever we go.

The Lord of Life,
he came to Calvary
bending his will upon the Father's love –
'Not my will but thine be done' –
accepting nature's bondage and the cost of sin

to make all free within the heart of Love,
the living Way of Truth,
that we, through love's response, by giving love,
to answer Love's request
by suffering taught
by him
in him
with him
might find his peace
the cheerful vision of his face,
and with him
in him
by him
in Love's eternal flow and pulse of love,
from death made free
from sin redeemed
in life restored,
to know in him
the eternal majesty of Love.

Adore the God who in Christ reconciles the world to himself, not holding anyone's faults against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.