

My task today is a simple one:

- It's to present a Christmas message, which is new and captivating for everyone who hears it;
- So, it can't be the same message that you've heard before; and
- Of course, it's gotta come from one of the 2 Gospels that actually have the Christmas story in it [either Matthew or Luke];
- Knowing that most people who are in Church on Christmas morning, are well established in their faith, the message has to be 'meaty' and of a depth that's going to make you chew on it, until at least Christmas lunch; but
- At the same time, Christmas morning, we expect we'll have some visitors – maybe people who rarely (if ever) get to church, and so today's message has to be simple, straight forward, and evangelical;
- Christmas is a special day – it's Jesus' day – it belongs to Him... Christmas, is the Christ-mass – And even people who want to get rid of Christ out of Christmas, they're now calling it "the holiday"... I don't know if they realise the futility/absurdity of what they've done by changing "Christmas" to "Holiday", because the word "holiday" is a shortened form of "Holy Day". And I don't mind at all, if people want to call "Christmas" a "Holy Day". The whole purpose of the whole day today, is for it to **be** a Holy Day, for the Christ Mass – A day to

worship at the coming of our Saviour; but

- Everybody's wanting to get to their family Christmas celebrations (and finish opening their presents), and so I have to:
 - present the Gospel; and eternal truth;
 - meaty enough to chew on; but
 - in all its simplicity;
 - with a few engaging stories; and
 - an altar call at the end;
 - without offending anybody;
 - all in 10min or less.

It's a simple task... Ahhh – failed again... When you've done a certain number of Christmas messages, year after year, eventually you've got to re-tell the same old story (which is a good story, and worth re-telling), **or** you've gotta go a little bit deeper, **or** a little bit wider...

And that's pretty much been my practice, over about the last decade...

- Some years I re-tell that same old wonderful story of the birth of Jesus (Matt / Luke);
- Some years, we go a little bit deeper, and we dig deeper into the Gospel record of the birth of Jesus; and
- Some years, we take it a little bit wider, and we draw the message of Christmas, from other passages of Scripture

And that's what we're going to be doing this year – we're going to go wider. And by going wider, we may need to go a little bit deeper, but today, we're certainly **not** going to plumb the depths of **this** passage (we'd be here until New Year's Day)... Today's going to be a bit of a taste / appetiser / an

overview, and then we'll dig deeper in a couple of weeks time, when we get to it in our normal weekly series.

Today, we're going to be talking about "reconciliation", which is a very Christmassy theme...

*In the 1700's, Charles Wesley was a **prolific** hymn-writer. Over his lifetime, he **published** over 6 000 hymns... And they weren't simple little ditties either. The theology of his hymns, and the teaching about Christ (that they contained) and what it means to follow Him, has been instrumental in developing the faith of millions of Christians, for generations...*

And one of his most famous hymns, that we sing every year, is "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" ... And in it, there is a line that says:

*"Peace on Earth and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled..."*

And that simple line of lyrics, encapsulates what Christmas is all about ...

Even people who aren't Christians crave for Peace on Earth in the Christmas season (or the Holy Day season), and especially on Christmas day – Peace on Earth and good-will, and all that stuff...

If we could just (for 1 day of the year), all 'get on' ...

During WW I, in the trenches, there were a few spots where the Germans and Allies climbed out of their trenches on

Christmas day, and they met half way across no-man's-land, and they shook hands and traded gifts... Apparently in one spot, they had a game of soccer,,, But then they all returned to their trenches, and a day or so later, the guns began again...

That's a bit of the image we have for Christmas: If we could just (for 1 day of the year), all 'get on'...

But you know very well, that when you're setting the Christmas table, you can't sit:

- *Aunt Maud next to Granny, because they'll just pick, pick, pick at each other;*
- *Uncle Fred next to Cousin Joe, because that'll end in raised voices (or maybe even fisticuffs);*
- *Franky next to Terry, because something happened years ago (nobody even knows what it was), but now they just can't stand each other...*

And we desperately want everyone to 'get on' and love each other, even if it's just for this one day – for a moment of togetherness, to express the Christmas Spirit...

And at Christmas time (like no other), we make the effort. We **try** to form a community of peace:

- In our families;
- In our work places;
- In our local communities;
- In our churches...

We try to orchestrate (or choreograph) a community of peace, by:

- Degrees of separation (I'll get closer to this person, but not close enough that I'll let them rile me);
- Forced tolerance (I will put up with this person – I will tolerate everything about them that I find offensive);
- Pretend that past hurts – past sins against us, didn't actually happen...

And then we complete the illusion of our community of peace, with an appropriate facial expression, that will hopefully mask anything that betrays the illusion of peace we're trying to create...

Now, I know very well, that that's not what it's like for everyone...

- Some work places are like that – some aren't;
- Some local communities are like that – some aren't;
- Sadly, some local churches are like that – most aren't;
- Some families are like that – Some aren't. Most wider extended families, have little glimpses of it. – Little glimpses, that we try to keep hidden, so that we can maintain our illusion of peace...

Do you think that's what God had in mind for Christmas??? I don't think so... There's nothing fake about God, and He wants us to be authentic too.

And the only way for there to be authentic peace, is through reconciliation... Charles Wesley understood this, when he wrote those words: *“Peace on Earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled...”*

....

Now, at Christmas time, the task for a preacher, is to get people to think **beyond** the birth of a baby in a manger... And to consider “**Why** Jesus came?” “What was the purpose, that Jesus left His throne-room in Heaven, to come to planet earth, to be born in Bethlehem?””

The Angel came to Joseph and told him, “Joseph, it’s OK to marry Mary (It’s by the Holy Spirit that she’s conceived). And ^{Matthew 1:21} She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Alright, this is why Jesus came – to save us from our sins. We know this, from the Gospel Christmas record... But to understand “**How** Jesus saved us from our sins”, we’ve got to go a bit wider than the Gospel Christmas story.

And that’s where we come to today’s reading. In our series, we’ve actually been working our way through 2 Corinthians... It’s a letter that Paul wrote to a broken church... And even his relationship with some of them, was broken... And in today’s reading, he opens up the concept of “reconciliation”. What is reconciliation???

I’m the treasurer of the St George Pistol Club. And one of the jobs that I have to do, is to keep the books in order, and part of that is to reconcile the books... And some of you know all

about doing a bank reconciliation statement... You have all of the income from the Income Cashbooks and all of the expenditure from the Expenses Cashbooks, and you have your bank statement that shows the balance at the start of the year and the balance at the end of the year, and you put all of this together, to show that you haven't made any mistakes...

And sometimes, I go to reconcile the books, or even the petty cash, and it's a few dollars out... And it can take hours to find where you've made the mistake...

But “reconciliation” is about “restoring a proper balance”.

The **Greek** word that Paul uses here καταλλαγῆς (katallagēs), is about an **exchange** that takes place:

It **can** be used in the context of money:

- Money is exchanged for goods; or
- Money is changed from one currency to another;

But this word can **also** be used for exchanging:

- Peace for war;
- Love for anger
- Friendship for enmity

But when Paul uses it in relation to humanity and God, he's talking about a transformation of relationships. Reconciliation restores humans to a proper relationship with God. It brings our relationship with God back into balance.

The message of the Gospel, is a message of reconciliation – it's about restoring us to a proper relationship with God. And throughout today's reading, Paul moves us from:

- A fear (that we have) **of** Christ;
- To the **love** of Christ (that He has for us);
- To our ministry **in** Christ...

And all these are reasons that Paul gives, for why he shares this message of reconciliation...

So, let's begin with the fear of God:

I think it would be pretty fair to say, that we have generally, become a generation who have lost the fear of God... Can I be very blunt, and say, "That is very foolish". If we don't have a healthy, respectful, fear of God, we don't know God very well... And it's **not** only a fear of God the Father – This is about having a healthy fear of Jesus Christ...

Now, some of you may be amazed that I say this: Why on earth, would we ever fear Jesus??? Well, in V9&10 (which come just before today's reading), Paul is reminding us, that all of us (including disciples of Jesus) [you can take that up with the Apostle Paul if that messes with your theology] **must** all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

I don't know why so many Christians seem so lost, wondering "I don't know what my purpose is." There shouldn't be anything mysterious about this – our purpose – our aim in living, is to please the Lord... How we live, matters...

A lot of ink has been spilt over that verse – Whether he's talking about punishment or reward, and we're not going to

spend time on it today – we dug into that on the 22nd
December 2019...

And we can argue about whether he's talking about judgment, or whether he's talking about reward or whatever... But the fact remains that Paul (an Apostle of Jesus), understands that because of this (**all appear before the judgment seat of Christ**), we should know the fear of the Lord...

And this “**knowing the fear of the Lord**” should move us in 2 ways:

1. Our aim should be to please Him (v9); and
2. We should be moved to persuade others to be reconciled to Jesus (v11)...

Alright, so it's out of fear of Christ – knowing that He will judge the world, we should be driven, to persuade others, “Be reconciled to Jesus – escape judgment.” There's no other way, to escape judgment. The only way to escape judgment, is to be reconciled to Jesus...

And yet he also says: “¹⁴ **For the love of Christ controls us**”...

And this is the amazing thing. **Fear** and **Love** are **both** at work, and they are **both** driving us, to this thing called “reconciliation”... And sometimes, a person's journey of faith might begin as a response to fear, but then it becomes a relationship of love...

Jesus Christ isn't only our judge – He is our Saviour...

14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; **15** and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

That sentence sounds tangled and convoluted, and complicated. Let me untangle it for you:

Jesus loves you and I so much, that He died for us... Perhaps the last thing we want to think about, at the birth of a baby boy, is the way that that Baby's going to die. And in the case of Jesus, 30-odd years after His birth, He would undergo a **hideous** method of execution... And yet, **that** was the whole purpose of His coming.

The fact that King Herod was trying to kill Jesus at His birth – it sets the tone for His whole life, which (in mortal terms) ended up being quite short....

Alright, so to save us from our sins, Jesus died and rose again – He conquered Sin and Death... But for us to receive some kind of **benefit** from this, there has to be some kind of **exchange** that takes place. And the necessary exchange, is nothing other than:

- His life for mine; and
- My life for His...

(now, I know who's getting the better deal there)

Because of my enormous weight of sin – not only the naughty things that I do – but my very rejection of God, and me setting myself up above God – that's sin... “Yeah Lord, I know what

you say is right, but I've got other plans".. That's sin... And because of my enormous weight of sin, I deserve death...

And here's the first step of the great exchange: Jesus suffered and died on the cross, because I deserved it; and because you deserved it; and because all of humanity deserved it...

- Jesus gave His life for mine; and
- He gave His life, for yours...

But there's a second part of the exchange. A reconciliation doesn't take place, without the 2-way exchange... **Yes**, He gave His life for mine, but I also give my life for His...

To be saved – to be reconciled to God, we must be born again...

We talked about this a few weeks ago:

Paul talks about putting to death the old, sinful man, and raising up the new...

I was so corrupt; my sin was so ingrained, the person that I was (to the core of my being), was so vile, that I couldn't make a few amendments to my lifestyle – I had to be born again... And so do you.

I was totally powerless to save myself from sin, and so Jesus gave His life for mine; and He gave His life for yours...

And so we live. **But we don't live for ourselves any longer.** We live for **Him**. We live for the One who died for our sake. We live for Jesus...

And a Spiritual transformation takes place in us – we’re not the same any longer... And the change that God can do in your life, is so radical, that Paul says:

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself

*Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild;
God and sinner reconciled...*

We’re not talking about:

- Pretending to get on;
- Trying to be a better person;
- Hiding who we really are; and we’re **certainly** not talking about
- Embracing our old sinful self and convincing ourselves to be content with that...

Reconciliation, is about the total ‘doing away’ with the old sinful self, and becoming a new creation...

Now, **I** can’t do that. And **you** can’t do that... “Creation”, is the domain of God. And through reconciliation, that’s exactly what He does... He does away with our old sinful self; We are born again; and He creates us anew. ...

And as ‘a new creation’ in Christ, we then become ‘ambassadors’ for Christ...

And as ambassadors for Christ (as His representatives) – (you know this reconciliation thing’s a pretty good thing, hey – it’s

a pretty good deal)... And so we appeal to others, “Get in on this deal. Be reconciled to Christ”... I mean, this is “good news”. Why would we keep it to ourselves???

....

And I’m really rushing us here now, but as a New Creation, we’re not only reconciled with God – we become **agents** of reconciliation, and reconcile with one another... By the time we get to v11, Paul is pleading with the Corinthian Church, “Hey, our hearts are open wide to you, but you’ve shut yourself off from us...” And He’s pleading for them to **open** themselves, as brothers and sisters in Christ...

We become agents of reconciliation. We **don’t** shut ourselves off, and we **don’t** create an illusion of Peace and Good-will – we become agents of reconciliation, with one another.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about reconciliation, is it’s costly... For me to be reconciled with God, it took the death of His Son... But I also had to give up my life, and surrender it to Jesus... He is now my Lord. I’m not the boss of me – He is...

And when we reconcile with one another, that can be costly too... We have to actually give up:

- Hatred
- Bitterness;
- Jealousy;
- Pride;
- Envy;

And we probably need to:

- Ask for forgiveness;
- To give forgiveness;

(Just as God has given us)

- Grace;
- Mercy;
- Love.

And this all has to be done, in the context of “truth” and “truthfulness” and “truth-telling”... We don’t just overlook sins...

- We name sin;
- We repent of sin; and
- We seek forgiveness from God; and
- We seek forgiveness from each other...

Reconciliation can’t be pretend, and we can’t just ‘white-wash’ over past hurts... We need to be authentic.

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So there you go:

I don’t know if you expected this for your Christmas message or not, but I urge you:

- To be authentic this Christmas
- Be reconciled to God; and
- Be reconciled to one another. Don’t just pretend
- It is right to fear God;

- And for those who don't know Jesus, I urge you "Be reconciled to God"
- But even as Disciples of Jesus, how we live, matters. It matters a lot.

And so:

- **Love** in the Name of Christ;
- Urge others, to also be reconciled to Christ;

And to you as the church, and as Christian families:

- Be a reconciling community – reconciling with one another.

Merry Christmas, and I pray you will have a happy Holy Day....