



“Certain yet imperfect communion”

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James of Jerusalem

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Genesis 33:1-11

Acts 15:12-22a

Matthew 13:53-58

There is a prayer in our New Zealand Prayer Book included in the Daily Devotions for Wednesday morning that says this:

*“If we want to be with Jesus,
we must forget ourselves, carry our cross and follow.
If we want to save our life we will lose it
but if we lose our life for Christ and for the gospel,
we will save it.
With us it is impossible, but not for God.
Only God can save us.”*

Whenever I say this prayer, part of me rejects its very message as impossible. I wonder if I will ever be able to say it with complete conviction. My human “figure-out mind” (a phrase shared at a retreat I went to recently) questions the ability of God to do the impossible. My personal quest for perfection in all I do doesn’t quite fit with the idea of forgetting myself. How can losing (control of) my life lead to saving it? I regularly struggle to conceive of the unconditional, consistent, and absolutely unshakeable desire of God to bring each of us into union with God, and into union and right relationship with one another. It just seems unachievable, impossible.

Yet I know that there have been situations in my life and in the lives of others close to me when the seemingly impossible has been made possible;

when there was no explanation other than the outworking of the grace of God. The ability to forgive, when forgiveness seemed impossible, was somehow given. Deep peace, in the midst of a terrifying cancer diagnosis, was somehow attainable. Difficult and strained relationships, when a way through was once unimaginable, were somehow put right.

Our readings today are about relationships: often difficult relationships that were healed and restored.

The relationship between brothers Jacob and Esau is a prime example of a relationship that seemed to have no hope of ever being put right. As Reverend Ellie shared recently, Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his rightful inheritance. Through deception and lies, aided and abetted by his mother, Jacob tricked his father Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau. Yet years later, the two brothers are reconciled. Esau, once cheated, now runs to greet his brother who comes with gifts to offer. Against all the odds, and putting past bitterness and deceit behind them, Jacob and Esau are reconciled. There is repentance and forgiveness; embracing and weeping; confession and acceptance. What once seemed impossible became possible.

Today we call to mind James, the brother of Jesus. He is remembered as a key leader of the church in Jerusalem, with a role in mediating disputes. At this time in the early church, as the numbers of converts to Christianity grew, there was conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. We need to remember that Christianity began as a sect within Judaism. Jewish Christians therefore desired complete continued observance of the ceremonial requirements of their Jewish laws. The Gentile Christians, however, who responded afresh from outside Judaism to the calling to follow Jesus, sought exemption from those laws. How could there possibly be a way through this issue? James appears to have offered a compromise, mainly around food regulations, that would require Gentiles to observe certain practices so that Jewish and Gentile Christians would be able to share table fellowship with one another. So, in today's Collect, we recall James's example as we pray that the church "may give itself continually to prayer and to the reconciliation of all who are at variance and enmity".

I'd like now to share a contemporary situation where the seemingly impossible appears to be open to a fresh touch of God's grace and reconciliation.

As Peter Stuart and I prepared for today's service he shared news from the wider Anglican Communion about the recent meetings of Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the commissioning of 19 pairs of Catholic and Anglican Bishops "sent out" for joint mission in their local areas.

Pope Francis told the bishops as they all gathered in Rome:

"Fourteen centuries ago Pope Gregory sent the servant of God, Augustine, first Archbishop of Canterbury, and his companions, from this holy place, to preach the joyful message of the Word of God. Today we send you, dear brothers, servants of God, with this same joyful message of his everlasting kingdom."

Archbishop Justin Welby reminded them:

"Our Saviour commissioned his disciples saying, 'Peace be with you'. We too, send you out with his peace, a peace only he can give."

Each of the 19 pairs of Bishops come from different countries, spanning six continents. Bishop Ross Bay, Anglican Bishop in Auckland, and Archbishop John Dew, Catholic Archbishop in Wellington, are the two Bishops who were commissioned as part of this ceremony in Rome and "sent back" for joint mission here in Aotearoa New Zealand. ¹

During their recent joint ceremonies, Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby exchanged deeply symbolic gifts: Pope Francis gave Justin Welby a replica of Pope Gregory's crozier, while Justin Welby gave Pope Francis his own pectoral cross. The cross, a symbol of reconciliation between peoples, is made of nails taken from the roof of Coventry Cathedral, which was bombed during the Second World War.

Pope Francis said:

"We must always follow the example of the Lord himself, his pastoral method. This means going out in search of the lost sheep, bringing back the stray to the sheepfold, binding the wounds of those in pain, caring for the sick. Only in this way will those who are scattered be reunited."

¹ Anglican Communion News Service <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2016/10/anglican-and-roman-catholic-bishops-sent-out-for-united-mission.aspx>

National Catholic Reporter <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-and-anglican-leader-say-churches-share-certain-yet-imperfect-communion>

He went on to say that he and the Archbishop of Canterbury have a duty as shepherds to *"prod those sheep who huddle together too closely, and urge them to move forward. The mission of shepherds is to help the sheep entrusted to them go forth and actively proclaim the joy of the Gospel, not to remain huddled in closed circles, in ecclesial 'micro-climates'."*

Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury recognise that there continue to be "serious obstacles" blocking the path to full unity between their two churches. They stated, however, that clergy and faithful should not *"undervalue that certain yet imperfect communion that we already share. While, like our predecessors, we ourselves do not yet see solutions to the obstacles before us, we are undeterred. We trust in God's grace and providence, knowing that the Holy Spirit will open new doors and lead us into all truth."*

In addressing the newly commissioned Bishops, Pope Francis said that when preparing for a new mission in their communities, Catholics and Anglicans should always ask themselves if there might be a way to include the other community in their work.

Here in Eastbourne and the bays, as we live into the challenge of being community outside our building, we are finding ourselves engaging with our Presbyterian and Catholic neighbours more than ever: we are worshipping in their worship spaces; we are discovering new opportunities to gather together; and we are engaging in fresh discussions about our joint mission in our community. All these blessings are being discovered in the context of the closure of our church buildings. Who would have thought it was possible that anything good might be gained from that situation of loss. Yet we profess that with God nothing is impossible.

May we give thanks today for the 'certain yet imperfect communion' that binds us within our own faith community, and that binds us with our neighbours in Christ locally, nationally and internationally.

May we give thanks for the inspiring examples of reconciliation in the story of the people of God through the ages.

And may we pray for the gift of perception to recognise new doors opened by the Holy Spirit, leading us afresh into all truth.

Amen.