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God was in Christ and reconciled the World to himself

Meditation on 2. Corinthians 5:19

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DEALING WITH THE PAST SICHTBAR MACHEN FÜR DIE ZUKUNFT

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A critical situation arose in the year 1985. At this time many townships were occupied and controlled by the South African police and the defence force. Young people were shot at indiscriminately from passing military vehicles simply if they were seen moving on the streets. The emergency regulations of the state made recourse to the courts nearly impossible. When young people retaliated against such repression by methods which entailed the danger of further loss of life some representatives of the churches felt the need to warn them. Unfortunately an appeal for reconciliation was often made in this context.

A number of ministers became alarmed when they heard such appeals. Even if the response of the people to extreme measures of military repression and arbitrary killing at times was inconsiderate and highly dangerous, was it right to appeal to them for reconciliation in such a context? Would this not alienate many people from the Church and make it difficult for them to understand the Gospel? Was it not rather necessary to address the authorities who were responsible for the repression and for the killings with an appeal for justice and respect for human life and dignity and with a demand that the system of injustice be demolished?

This was the situation in which the first steps were taken towards the formulation of the Kairos Document. It started with a meeting of a small group of ministers in Soweto. They consulted not only on how the crisis in South African society could be addressed. For them it was a crisis also of the Church. Can one allow the Biblical concept of reconciliation to be used for calming down the resistance of the people against the system of injustice without exposing the injustice itself? Does this not amount to a distortion of the Gospel? The few people who met on this cold Sunday morning in Soweto never had the slightest idea that they were embarking on an important project. The fact that the Kairos Document eventually received such wide publicity and attention in the ecumenical movement and in churches all over the world was an indication that this is an issue that is at stake in many churches and in many countries in our time. The Kairos Document emphasized that there can be no reconciliation without justice and without repentance and confession. There can be no cheap reconciliation, no reconciliation without truth.

The Kairos Document concentrated on a particular dimension of the Biblical concept of reconciliation. It was concerned about the healing of relationships in a disrupted and divided society and the steps that had to be undertaken before such healing could set in. The Biblical concept of reconciliation, however, comprises also another dimension. It pertains to the wider setting in which from a Christian perspective all human efforts at reconciliation are to take place. We in South Africa also have had our special experiences with this wider understanding of reconciliation. The Bible passage in 2. Cor. 5 from which our text has been taken is a key passage for the interpretation of the Biblical concept of reconciliation. It has been of central significance for the struggle within the different South African churches and on the part of the South African churches against the apartheid system.

In 1963 Dr. Beyers Naude was deprived of his status as a minister by the church in which he served. He had voiced strong warnings when the Dutch Reformed Church hesitated to take a stand against the apartheid system. The Sharpeville shootings had affirmed him in his conviction that silence on this matter amounted to collusion. The Dutch Reformed Church of which Beyers was a minister withdrew from its membership in the World Council of Churches because it addressed the South African Churches on their responsibility to take a stand for justice. Beyers became a leading figure in the Christian Institute which was established for facilitating Bible study and fellowship among Christians of different

denominations and for mutual support in the struggle against a system of injustice. He was elected as Director of the Institute. When the Dutch Reformed Church of Southern Transvaal refused to allow him to accept this position and to retain his position as a minister, he bade farewell to his congregation at Aasvoelkop with a sermon on the well-known text from Acts 5 on the refusal of the apostles to comply with the instruction of the authorities not to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, the crucified and the risen Lord. "We have to obey God rather than humans", was the response of the apostles to the authorities at that time. It was also the response of Beyers Naude to the church authorities at his time.

When Beyers was installed as Director of the Christian Institute in a special service in the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg he delivered a sermon on exactly the Bible passage which we have chosen for our meditation: 'In Christ God has reconciled the world'.

An important insight is underlying the choice of these Bible passages for these worship services. At the time when they took place they were inconspicuous events. From hindsight we discern them as important events in the history of the South African churches. The lesson they teach us is the following: Resistance against authorities upholding a system of injustice and the call for reconciliation are not contradictions, but complementary dimensions of one and the same Gospel. In fact the whole involvement of the churches or sections of the churches in the struggle against the apartheid system was an involvement in a conflict about reconciliation. The apartheid system was based on the assumption that people who differ in race, language and culture so much as the different groups of the South African people are irreconcilable. They cannot live together in peace, unless they are separated. By virtue of their faith Christians were bound to resist an ideology of irreconcilability.

On various occasions the Bible passage from 2. Corinthians 5 affirmed Christians in the conviction that the Biblical concept of God's reconciliation in Christ committed them to take up the struggle against the apartheid system and resist the ideology of irreconcilability and its practical implementation. In 1968 the Message to the People of South Africa, worked out jointly by the newly established South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute, condemned this ideology of irreconcilability on the basis of our Bible passage. Again in 1982 the same Biblical insight found its expression in the Belhar confession of churches of Reformed background. This confession also has its roots in the well-known Bible passage in 2 Corinthians 5.

How could it happen that the Biblical concept of reconciliation was referred to in so many different contexts and given such contradictory interpretations?. Our text can help us to find an explanation. The meaning of the term reconciliation depends very largely on the position of the person or the group using it. Our text speaks not about any type of reconciliation, but about reconciliation in Christ. It says "God was in Christ." In saying this, the apostle points out: We Christians do not believe in an impartial God, but in a partisan God. This God has chosen sides with the victims. In Christ God himself /herself has become a victim to the violence and oppression to which humans are exposed. In Christ he/she has shared the pain of the victims, but has not retaliated by responding with hatred and violence. The cycle of violence that has determined the course of human history and the relationship between humans and Creation has been broken up. By raising Jesus from the dead God has affirmed the victory over the forces of death and repression. At the same time he/she has affirmed the human dignity of the victims of repression. Their names and their pain may not remain unknown. It has become pain inflicted upon God. Every human rights violation is pain inflicted upon God.

The understanding of reconciliation from the perspective of the victim is radically different from that of the person or the group that is responsible for upholding a system of repression. The meaning of the word reconciliation thus in South Africa when used by Mr. Nelson Mandela was radically different from the meaning it had when used by Mr. F. W. De Klerk at the time when he was still in charge of a government that upheld and justified the apartheid system.

Our Bible passage thus has far reaching implications for understanding reconciliation from a Christian perspective: Since God has taken sides in Christ with the victims of oppression, reconciliation can only be understood from the perspective of the victims and can only be initiated by the victims. This means that the wounds of the victims cannot remain hidden. They have to be disclosed for the sake of the victims, but also for the sake of the perpetrators.

A second feature of our text has often been overlooked. It says: "In Christ God has reconciled the world." It thus speaks about a reconciliation that has already happened before any steps are taken by us towards reconciliation. All of us whether we are victims or perpetrators of violence or both or whether we have indirectly supported and endorsed violence by not intervening on behalf of fellow human beings or of Creation, all of us depend on a reconciliation that has already happened in Christ. Everyone of us will be aware of examples in the history of humankind which illustrate how easily victims of human rights violations tend to internalize the injustice they have suffered and to pass it on to others as soon as they have the power to do so. The people who formulated the Interim Constitution for the Republic of South Africa were very well aware of this trend that is alive in all of us when they worked out the last section of that document. Here they laid down provisions for dealing with the past in a way that serves the aim of reconciliation and avoids retaliation. The solemn style of this section and the inclusion of the hymn 'Nkosi sikelele Africa', a prayer for God's blessing for Africa, is an indication of their awareness that they were touching a task that according to our general experience transcends the potential of humans merely relying on their own resources. In making these comments I am relying on a report I heard from a person who participated in working out this section of the Interim Constitution.

The Bible passage on the reconciliation that God has established in Christ from which our text is drawn gives us the assurance that an effort to deal with the past and to make a new beginning is not a presumptuous undertaking if it is based on a foundation that cannot be shaken. It starts with the sentence: "Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, the new has come". We therefore may not simply argue that the evils that have happened in the past will inevitably happen again at one stage or another, since humans do not change. On the other hand we are also alerted that such concern for reconciliation requires a continuous commitment and involvement of the believers in the midst of adversities and the wrestling with the obstacles which they themselves pose to God's reconciliation. The apostle therefore appeals to the believers and beseeches them to be ambassadors of the reconciliation that God has brought about in Christ. In this continuous struggle it is not only necessary to remember the victims of the past, but also to be reminded of people who have taken up the struggle for justice and peace and persevered through relying on God's presence in Christ in our situation.

In South Africa we have many examples of people who stood for justice in spite of the rejection and persecution they experienced. Many of them were Christians, others were people of other faiths, some were people not attached to any particular religious faith or community. Cherishing their memory is part of dealing with the past. In Germany you also have such examples. At the same time there are instances of a long-standing refusal of being confronted

with the past because of the pain this can cause. Only yesterday a report appeared in a German daily newspaper about discussions that have taken place in the synod of the Regional Church of Hanover. 50 years after the end of the Second World War the authorities of this church for the first time have officially admitted that a prominent church leader from its ranks colluded with the Nazi regime during his tenure of office. If such reports are reliable they are a warning to our churches in South Africa to examine their own records and not to hesitate to admit their own failures wherever they have occurred. The reliance on God's reconciliation in Christ on which all of us depend liberates us to confess our own failures in order to be free for making a new beginning.

Our conference can make use of experiences of a previous effort of Christians from three different countries which have undergone radical political change to deal with the past. It was undertaken only a few months ago. In September a group of ten South Africans visited Germany and Poland for a trialogue program on dealing with the past. They visited places at which terrible crimes have occurred. They saw scenes of genocide such as Auschwitz in Poland. They mutually exchanged their experiences and their understanding of the Gospel in the light of what has happened. Next year the trialogue program is to be continued when a group of Germans and Poles will visit to South Africa in order to be exposed to the experiences of South Africans in the recent past. They will reflect on their commitment to take care from the perspective of the Gospel that what has happened does not happen again. I am reading a passage from a report worked out in the evaluation session of the trialogue partners at the end of the first phase of the program on what they had to say at the end of their common experience in Europe on truth and reconciliation and justice:

"True reconciliation cannot take place without truth and justice. Our goal is true peace, that which the Bible names as shalom. We believe there can be no peace without justice and that 'shalom' is the product of true justice and reconciliation.

- Truth

In Germany, Poland and South Africa, reconciliation demands the facing of the legacy of the past. Victims must have names, cries must be uncovered, the functioning of the bureaucratic system of repression must be exposed. But also, the history of resistance must be uplifted and celebrated. Heroes and heroines must be honoured. Those who were convicted by legal structures of oppression must be exonerated. If we do not learn from the inhumaneness of the past, we are bound to repeat it. If we do learn from the struggles for justice in our history, we will be enabled to shape a new future together.

- Justice

There is also no true reconciliation without justice. In South Africa, Germany, and Poland, justice demands the dismantling of structures of oppression which preserve racism, white supremacy, power and privilege. Justice demands the shaping of new structures that promote racial equality, and equality in economics, land distribution and use, immigration, etc.

- Reconciliation

True reconciliation brings new life to victim and perpetrator alike. Both victim and perpetrator are captive to systems of oppression. Beneath the illusion that perpetrators benefit from oppression is the reality that the end result is their own self-destruction. True reconciliation requires that perpetrators, along with the victims, acknowledge their need for new life and liberation. As Christians we believe that God calls us to a new beginning and enables the transformation of structures of oppression, whereby all people in society live together in justice and community."

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