

From: Annemie Bosch [<mailto:annemie@x-stream.co.za>]
Sent: Sunday, 24 October 1999 15:11
Subject: Reconciliation and Healing

Annemie Bosch
31-14th Street, Menlo Park,
0081 PRETORIA Gauteng,
South Africa te. 012 - 46-8706
Gegroet! Greetings!

Some of you may have received this article. I would appreciate your comments on it. Thanks you! -- From 27 October till 21 December I will be in Germany, but my mail will be forwarded.—
Thanks! In Christ - Annemie

Sommige van julle het reeds hierdie artikel ontvang. Ek sal egter enige kommentaar verwelkom -
Vanaf 27 Oktober tot 21 Desember is ek in Duitsland, maar my e-pos word aangestuur. Baie dankie!
In Christus - Annemie

THEOLOGICALLY SPEAKING October 1999

Memory and Forgiveness: Vehicles for Reconciliation
by Annemie Bosch

This is the fourth essay in our series on mission in the new millennium.

INTRODUCTION

Today I saw the film A Reasonable Man and marvelled at the ingenious way the script writer used the story to create a better understanding between the racial groups in South Africa. Last week I was in Mamelodi at a conference where Prof. JNJ (Klippies) Kritzinger told the story of his life and then went on to draw some conclusions from his own story, trying to analyse the racist element in the Church. In the discussion afterwards two participants said that his story had come across powerfully, whereas the analysis had left them floundering. To this Klippies answered:

“What more evidence do you need?”

In our context, the context in which I am trying to get under the skin of my neighbour, “storytelling is more important than theological lectures”. These two snippets underline the power of storytelling. In this discussion I want to explore storytelling as one of the most powerful catalysts in breaking down barriers between people—a tool entrusted to us by God and already used with great effect in recent transitional processes in South Africa.

HISTORY AND STORY IN SOUTH AFRICA

There was the miracle of April 1994. Preceded by unbearable tension during the last few weeks before the election, it seemed as if civil war was inevitable. For five weeks during 1993 Michael Cassidy from African Enterprise and his team brought together divergent groups of politicians. Many of them had never even spoken to each other before and most of them regarded the others with suspicion. Yet, as they listened to each other telling their personal stories, something started to happen. Across all dividing chasms each began to understand something of what made “the other” tick. Although such understanding does not automatically bring agreement, it does make it more difficult to remain hostile or to write off “the other”.

This, coupled with country-wide prayer and non-stop efforts by such as Cassidy, contributed to averting catastrophe, realising an inclusive and peaceful election.

Another of these processes was the hearings of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation

(TRC). As people told their stories, terrible though they were, bonds were forged, an atmosphere of empathy and hope—even of elation—was created among those present. How sad that only a handful of whites ever attended the TRC hearings. What a wonderful opportunity was missed—an opportunity to break down old stereotypes, to rejoice with the people, to build new relationships and to be given hope for the future.

And now we have already had a second free election and the TRC hearings are a thing of the past, yet the healing process has only just begun. In any case, authentic inner healing is more than simply telling your story. Telling your story is a liberating experience, but without faith in Jesus Christ it will remain a mere shadow of that deeper reconciliation the Gospel tells us about. I think the Church has an enormous responsibility to pick up where the TRC left off, and move with the process towards biblical reconciliation.

The Victims: Furthermore, the TRC could only listen to a limited number of people. Only those who had experienced “gross violation of human rights”, could tell their stories—and only a small number from all the submissions received could be accommodated. The result is that many others and thousands more who had “only” suffered the unbearable humiliation of discrimination all their lives, did not have the opportunity to tell their stories. In their innards the debilitating pain still lies like a heavy stone.

The Soldiers: On the whole, those involved in “The Struggle”, whichever side they were on, believed that the enemy understood only the language of violence. They also believed that any deed, however immoral, was ratified by the fact that it was being done for the “greater good”. Inevitably this attitude blunted their moral conscience. For this reason those guilty of “gross human rights violations” were also invited to tell all they had done, and could apply for amnesty.

I will come back to this later.

The Backlash: In contrast to the relief and joy at the miraculously peaceful political changeover in 1994, and the real willingness at the time to work for a New South Africa, there is currently an enormous backlash in the white community. This was brought about by uncertainty and fear of what the future might bring, bitterness about higher taxes, severance packages, growing unemployment, the escalation of violent crime and especially the perception that, in spite of the constitution, their rights are not, and will not, be respected.

WAYS FORWARD

This analysis is not complete at all, but it is enough to convince us that there are, even today, very few people in South Africa who are without any pain, guilt, fear or bitterness of some kind in relation to the past and/or the present political and social system. To this day many old divisions remain, and new ones have come into being. This being the case, how can we move forward?

We Need a Forum: We need a space where people can meet each other across all divides. By “space” I do not only mean a geographical place, but a spiritual and psychological space, a place for “process”, a safe-house. At the same time I am also talking about a venue, perhaps one in each area, where people from different churches, language and race groups could meet. We do need a place in which we can physically come into each other’s presence, for only then can we truly listen to each other. It is in listening to each other that forgiveness, reconciliation and healing begin to happen.

We Need to Remember: Listening to each other’s stories signifies the willingness to remember. Not only must we listen to “the other’s” story, but we should also be willing to accept the truth others tell us about ourselves. Since none of us really knows what we did, and are doing, to each other, it is essential that we hear this from outside. That opens a door in us to accept the realities of the past and to appropriate the memories of “the other”. In this way our histories can become one. Concrete Christian reconciliation takes place where, through repentance and forgiveness, we have developed these common memories. The whole process sets us free to start writing the story of our common future—together.

Without doubt it will be an extremely painful and frustratingly slow process. We can only stay part of this process if we remain completely dependent on God’s Spirit. He alone can give us the

patient tenacity to stay involved even if our perseverance may have to stretch over generations. The future of our nation depends on our commitment to this process. It is not one option among many. As Christians we have no other option.

THE OBSTACLE OF AMNESIA

Many us, however, prefer to forget. There are those of us who believe talking about old wounds will lead to renewed bitterness and retribution. "Blocking out the past" becomes our way of handling the situation. However, sweeping injustice under the carpet gives it a chance to hatch a demon that, one day, when you least expect it, will come at you screaming for revenge. My late husband used to say, "you cannot heal a festering wound by putting sticking plaster on it". It has to be opened, cleaned and drained before it can heal. In the same way genuine Christian healing and peace can only be achieved when old wounds are opened and cleaned. There is no shortcut.

Forgetting without forgiveness does not lead to peace—at the most it can lead to a truce. In order to reach Christian peace, forgiveness is needed. Jesus says his peace is not the same as the peace the world can give (John 14:27). His peace is built on pardon and reconciliation, and reconciliation in the evangelical sense is not built on forgetting, but on remembering.

If you forget the past it means you are strangling the truth. It means that as Christians we are forgetting God's revelation, Israel's temple worship and the Good News of the cross. By forgetting you are actually declaring that even the vicarious death of Jesus was in vain.

THE MEMORIES OF PAUL

The apostle Paul talks about the past time and again. He was reconciled with God. All the same, he never forgot how he had persecuted the followers of Jesus (Phil.3:6; 1 Tim.1:13). Neither did he forget how he had been flogged by the Jews (2 Cor 11:23-25). He was both perpetrator and victim.

In Christian reconciliation we always have two parties—the perpetrator who remembers his guilt and therefore repents, and the victim who remembers his suffering, but in spite of this, forgives. It is important to note the great difference between remembering the past without reconciliation, and remembering the past with reconciliation. Without reconciliation, remembering will always be painful, but after reconciliation both victim and perpetrator can remember without pain. Paul shows us that this is true. Both his tale as victim and the one about his violent deeds are told without pain. In 1 Tim.1:12-17 Paul explains to Timothy how reconciled memories are memories of the grace that God has bestowed on you, and how reconciled remembrance changes pain into joy.

He says (v.13-14) "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy ... The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Can't you just feel the joy bubbling from these words?

In his letter to the Ephesians (2:11-22), Paul encourages the believers to remember how others, in earlier times, had looked down upon them, and how, when they were reconciled with God, they became accepted and became witnesses to the miracle of the dividing wall tumbling down.

Could there be more convincing examples of how reconciliation makes it absolutely imperative for us never to forget—examples which also demonstrate the width and the depth of God's mercy, and his forgiveness and acceptance of both perpetrators and victims? These passages eloquently portray how the whole quality of remembrance is changed by reconciliation.

WHAT OF THE CHURCH?

Some Christians and a number of denominations feel that they have already done all they could possibly do. We are all grateful for that which has been done, but has the bulk of the iceberg been even touched?

What is the Church doing to help in the healing process? Has it set up initiatives to help grass-roots people from diverse backgrounds to start accepting each other and understanding the

background from which each person comes? Is there a program to help people accept “the other”, to repent of their wrongdoings, to forgive each other, to do restitution? Have our churches changed the way in which clergy are trained? It is my opinion - and I am not alone in this - that it is the responsibility of the church to urgently do something constructive, realistic and down to earth in order to meet these pressing needs (for constructive suggestions, see pages 150-155 in *Confession & Reconciliation: A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa* Ed. C.W. du Toit, 1998, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, UNISA, Pretoria.).

THE CHURCH AS A PLACE OF AMNESTY

Without reconciliation, remembering will always be painful ...God, in his mercy, created a safe haven for us. It is a place filled with so much compassion and acceptance that we feel safe going in there with our sins, our sorrows and our guilt. Hebrews 4 invites us to approach our sympathetic High Priest with confidence. 1 John 3 tells us that our hearts condemn us, but that God is greater than our hearts, and Math.11:28 says “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

The Church should also be such a safe place, so full of love and compassion and humility, so that people will come in and feel free to confess their sins to God and to each other. Perpetrators who confessed at the TRC still had to apply for amnesty. In the Church however, we can be given complete pardon.

For the Perpetrator: There is a perception amongst many that society is more concerned with the rights and the rehabilitation of violent criminals than for the healing of the victims. I do not

believe that there are many who have these priorities. Nevertheless, I do believe that criminals, like everybody else, also have their own stories which would make others understand better how they had become what and who they are. If that happened it would not mean at all that their deeds were condoned—only that we understood better, and realized that Christ also died for them, as he did for you and me.

Humanly speaking it is impossible to forgive violent criminals. Nonetheless, our Lord expects us to do so. He wants those who have wronged us personally, or our community, to have that same confidence we are offered in Hebrews 4—to approach their sympathetic High Priest and to come into the safe haven of the Church to confess their sin. For them it becomes extremely difficult and perplexing at this stage since, suddenly, those who have suffered through their heinous deeds have now become that haven.

Repenting makes one intensely vulnerable. You have to tell those who suffered because of you, that you have lived a lie. You have to tell them: “You were not safe with me, but now I am asking you, be my safe haven!” Many of us shrink from the mere thought of facing those we have abused. For this reason we prefer to try and forget, and to still the voice of our conscience.

It is normal to fear rejection. The Gospel goes against our normal reactions of self-preservation—although we then lack the wisdom to know that this is the only way we can be “preserved”. It tells us: “Lay down your life. Take the risk. Open your heart to your brother, your sister.” That, however, is not the natural thing to do. That is why we have to be “born again”. Without being “born from above” it will remain impossible.

For the Victim: What the Gospel expects from the victims is, humanly speaking, completely out of the question. Yet, victims have to have mercy on those who come to them completely defenceless, wanting to lay down their burdens; not because repenting makes them so special, but solely because the victims themselves have been shown compassion by their Father. The victims never stand outside the truth and reconciliation process. In truth they are the centre of the process. If they don't forgive, then reconciliation becomes impossible. We merely have to remember the parable of the unmerciful servant to know that God punishes the unforgiving. Jesus tells how the heartless servant was thrown into jail, and then he continues: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

CONCLUSION:

Miroslav Volf calls these safe-houses, these havens of mercy, “communities of embrace”. He says: “The only way to peace is through embrace—that is, after the parties have forgiven and repented, for without forgiveness and repentance embrace is a masquerade... How do we overcome our slippage into exclusion? We need the Spirit who ‘issues from the essential inward community of the triune God, in all the richness of its relationships,’ who lures people into fellowship with the triune God and opens them up for one another and for the whole creation of God.

The Spirit of embrace creates communities of embrace—places where the power of the Exclusion System has been broken and from where the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include the other.” The responsibility of the Church in South Africa today is to make this true! Let us pray for and work for an ongoing miracle—why should miracles be limited to 1994?

+++++