

**Qualities of a reconciler: vulnerable**

In Coventry Cathedral, we keep November as a ‘Season of Reconciliation’; a time when we focus on our vocation to be a reconciled and reconciling people. Our starting point is that this work of reconciliation is not the preserve of ‘experts’ but something asked of, *required* of, *all* God’s people, all God’s *saints*. That’s what our foundational text reminds us. 2 Corinthians 5.18: ‘God...reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us’ - given *us*— ‘the ministry of reconciliation.’

Throughout this season of reconciliation we’re going to explore what this mandate to reconcile asks of us; focusing not on the ‘what’ of reconciliation—on particular situations we might engage in—for there are opportunities for reconciliation in *every* interaction—not on the ‘*what*’ but on the ‘*who*’ of reconciliation; on the *qualities* of a reconciler; on how we’re to *be* if we’re to live out the four movements of reconciliation towards ourselves, God, others and the world.

In this series we’re going to suggest that to do this well we need to be imaginative, courageous and, today, vulnerable and we’ll explore each of these qualities in conversation with pairs of women and the extent to which they embraced them.

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Reconcilers are to be characterised by vulnerability. - A poem by Yehuda Amichai:

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the spring.

The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined house once stood.

At his dinner party, Simon the Pharisee conducts himself ‘from the place where he is right’; *right* according to his traditions; *right* according to the rules which define who is clean and who is unclean, in and out; *right* according to his own household etiquette. This rightness makes Simon’s mind ‘hard and trampled as a yard’; closed off. Simon’s rightness condemns Jesus: ‘If this man were a prophet’, he says, ‘he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner’ (Luke 7.39) - and in so doing condemns Simon himself as one who cannot see the new thing that God is doing; who is closed off to God’s spring.

The unnamed woman, on the other hand—and in her ‘no name’, incidentally, is a mark of her marginalisation—she is so far beneath attention that no-one bothers to give her any identity—the unnamed woman, on the other hand is full of ‘doubts and loves’ that lay her bare and open her to the life of God, to reconciliation with God. In slipping into the gathering, in letting down her hair, in weeping and kissing, she is utterly vulnerable, completely undefended. She knows all the ways in which she is wrong and all the things she doesn’t understand, and in that not knowing she is known. The woman holds nothing back in order that she might be held by Love.

From this place of vulnerability, *because* of this vulnerability, the woman is reconciled to God: 'Therefore I tell you', Jesus says to Simon, 'her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love' (v47). 'And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace"' (v50).

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Hannah, too, discovers that vulnerability unlocks reconciliation. Despite her husband's compassion, Hannah is completely broken by the agony of her childlessness; a pain prodded and provoked by her husband's other, *fertile*, wife. Completely at the end of herself, casting off all restraint, she goes to the temple and cries out to God, weeps before him, bargains for his intervention. She is the embodiment of a prayer my ordaining bishop, Jack Nicholls, taught me: 'Here I am, what a mess'. 'Here I am, what a mess.'

This prayer-in-extremis, this opening all of who she is to the God who is All, changes everything for Hannah. In due course she becomes pregnant with a son. But this is not the most significant outcome of her vulnerability, great though this blessing is; *more* significant that she discovers that God truly sees her, knows her, hears her, is tender towards her brokenness. In her vulnerability, Hannah is reconciled to God.

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Like Simon, Eli at first engages with Hannah only from 'the place where [he] is right' - and fundamentally *wrong*. Eli decides he knows *exactly* why Hannah is presenting as she is—because she's drunk, making a spectacle of herself (1 Samuel 1.13-14). But unlike Simon—who continues to be scandalised by Jesus—Eli *does* move towards a place of vulnerability, of opening himself to the other. To his credit, he listens to Hannah, receives what she has to say, prays for her and so is reconciled to her story.

Eli should be an encouragement to us. Because of our insecurities, perhaps, so many of us begin our interactions from the place where we are right, certain of our territory, restating it until the conversational ground is hard and trampled. Like Eli, though, we can learn curiosity, cede our editorial control of the narrative and say to another, 'Tell me more.' We might discover, in this new found openness, this edgy vulnerability, our own flourishing as well as the other's; that new life, new ways of being, might open up for us, too. Reconciliation is always mutual.

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There's something else that we mustn't miss in today's readings; something remarkable: that it's not only the *women* who are vulnerable here —Jesus is, too. Just pause to consider that: Jesus, Son of God, the one who works wonders, the one who—contra Simon's condemnation of him—has great insight, *Jesus* is vulnerable, too, as a matter of choice, as a matter of self-discipline, as a mode of ministry. Look: he goes into the hostile environment of Simon's house where he's no longer in control and risks his reputation by receiving the woman's touch. His elective vulnerability allows him to enact the kingdom where those outside are brought in, where the unclean are made clean and the rejected embraced. He opens himself to disgrace that the woman might be met with amazing grace.

In the same way, as reconcilers we may be called upon to choose vulnerability, to go into unpredictable spaces, to risk censure and even disgrace so that the hard and trampled ground of certainty might be plowed up and new life might emerge.

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In going to Simon's house, Jesus inhabits a particular practice of vulnerability for reconciliation that I want to commend to you. It's the openness, the preparedness, to be guest, not host. It's something that I think that we, at the Cathedral, with all its pull, all its attractional force, really need to understand and to experiment with.

Jesus is the guest, not the host, at Simon's house. He's in a space that he doesn't control. The conversation is not his to direct. However flawed Simon's hosting, Jesus is there to receive, not to give. There are significant ways in which he is not in charge. Jesus is dependent on others. We see the same practice of guest-not-host earlier in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus asks Peter if he can get into his boat to talk to the crowd (5.1-11), and later in the Gospel when he tells Zacchaeus that he's going to Zacchaeus' house (19.1-10). In all three cases being a guest not a host leads to transformation, and to reconciliation: Peter follows Jesus, the woman is forgiven, Zacchaeus is reconciled to the people of Jericho he had defrauded.

Why is being a guest rather than a host so significant for reconciliation? There is something, I think, about respecting the other; about offering them a measure of control; of signalling that you don't hold all the cards or have all the answers. It is taking them seriously as partner. Reconciliation is always mutual.

Let me share my own experience with you. Last year, we held an Iftar here in the Cathedral; a feast at which some 800 people, mainly Muslim, broke fast during Ramadan. In preparation for the feast, I worked with a small team of local Muslims, headed up by the wonderful Ayaz. A few days after the Iftar, Ayaz and his wife said that they'd like to take me out for a meal and offered to come somewhere close to the Cathedral, or to host me at their favourite curry house on the Foleshill Road. I opted for the curry because I instinctively grasped the importance of leaving 'my' territory and going where I wouldn't be in control.

It was a striking experience: the restaurant was segregated—one side for families, the other for single men. When I went to the toilet, Ayaz's wife insisted on accompanying me. I was the only visibly white person in the restaurant. I felt both deeply cared for and pretty vulnerable. But being beyond my sphere of influence and control opened up new insights for me—and for my hosts. They asked me why I've never married and I asked them if they were hoping for an arranged marriage for their daughter. It was the kind of conversation that only happens when guards are down, when doubts and loves dig up the world. It's one of my most cherished Coventry experiences.

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One of the qualities of a reconciler is to be vulnerable; to go to places where we're not in control; to press pause on certainty; to question; to doubt; to love. I've been doing some travelling recently, and a wonderful novel by Sarah Waiman, called *Still Life*, has accompanied me. Here is what one of the characters says to another as they arrive in a place they don't know and where they are not known: 'We're embarking on a world of new languages and new systems. A world of stares and misunderstandings and humiliations and we'll feel every single one of them. But we mustn't let our inability to know what's what diminish us. Because it'll try. We have to remain curious and open.'

We have to remain curious and open; to be undefended and vulnerable if we're to reconcilers. Cede control and see what happens.