As usual each time I come in, the breath-taking and austere beauty of this structure ruined and rebuilt catches my imagination afresh. In the golden anniversary service last year Rowan Williams preached memorably on the concrete text around us. And yet there is an irony, for the symbol stands as one of the greatest Cathedrals in an age for Christian churches that appears too often to think the words “Father forgive” are mere formality. In blunt terms, we have this conference because conflict is so much part of our lives.

That is all wrong. I do not mean that conflict is wrong, but that our fear of it, our sense of it being wasted time and effort, is wrong. So often we seek like mindedness so that we can get on with the job of worship, of making disciples, of serving other human beings. Because conflict in the church feels time consuming and destructive, we turn from facing it and instead seek those with whom we agree.

In Indiana there is a town called New Harmony. It is the rebuilt Harmony, which fell into disrepair when the original Harmonists fell out and left. It is the spirit of much Christianity: make a new frontier when things don’t work out with everyone, move on with those who agree - and again and again.

Conflict arises from the diversity in which we have been created, as both Sam and Jo Wells said over the last two days. When we seek to find a way of life that avoids it we deny the three realities of our fallenness, our present diversity, and the tension between the realised present and anticipated salvation of our futures. The Quaker Faith and Practice\(^1\) book says “by their silence the progress of world peace has stood still”, there is a need to name issues, to listen and to let go of fear.

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We live in reality, with its conflicts, when we call together on God. Ruth and Naomi were exiles, first one then the other, economic migrants whose suffering is matched by many of those who seek new lives today. Caught up in famine and war, families destroyed by disease, they come to a cross roads. Ruth’s unity with Naomi is established by the words “your God will be my God”. From that moment on, a moment of choice in love, responding to love, they are one far more deeply than as family in Moab.

That is passive unity, being part of the one family. But also when we call on God he “calls us to his side as heralds of reconciliation”. There is a challenge to active co-operation with the life of God in our lives now. We live and we serve. The recognition by the Samaritan of the other as his neighbour leads to action, not mere existence. He becomes a herald of reconciliation.

In the old expression, we can choose our friends but we are stuck with our family. And so, by calling on God we are bound into a fellowship of being heralds of the reconciliation we have received. We had better get used to it because it lasts for ever.

Like Sam Wells I understand human reconciliation as recognition of diversity and a transformation of destructive conflict to creativity. It holds the tensions and challenges of difference and confronts us with them, forcing us to a new way of life that accepts the power and depth and radicality of the work of the Holy Spirit in our conversions.

We speak often in foreign policy of failed states, or failing states. Their common characteristic is the inability to manage diversity and grow with it, enabling it to change them significantly into better places. The core of the American sense of exceptionalism is at its best often found within that vocation.

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of being a diverse and thriving nation. The story told by Jo Bailey Wells about
the Anglican House at Duke University makes the point.
If the Church is not a place both of conflict and of reconciliation it is not merely
hindering its mission and evangelism, appalling as such hindrance is, but it is a
failing or failed church. It has ceased to be the miracle of diversity in unity, of
the grace of God breaking down walls. We must be reconciled reconcilers.
When that happens we are unbelievably attractive, distinctively prophetic, not
because we all agree, but but because we disagree with passion in love, and set
the bar high for the world around. And then reach out and help people over the
bar.  
Because by the grace of God we are defined as family with a call to action in
reconciliation, then we have to find not only the call but also the means of
being reconcilers, when our instincts and passions often lead us in the opposite
direction. Circling the wagons and self-defining ourselves as those who are of
one mind against the rest of the world has a noble feeling. Hollywood inspired,
it gives us the feeling that this is a good day to die hard - hard of heart and hard
in action. By contrast the process of reconciliation seems weak and
unprincipled, alienating us from everyone involved in quarrel.
I find myself often doubting myself deeply: have I become totally woolly, taken
in by the niceness of bad people or bad theology, trapped in an endless quest for
illusory peace rather than tough answers? That is a question that all involved in
reconciliation should be asked, and held accountable to, but it is also part of the
process. Bonhoeffer, reflecting on the Good Samaritan, speaks of “the crooked
yet straight path of reconciliation”\(^3\). The Priest and the Levite travelled straight
on, the Samaritan turned aside. But his path to the neighbour was straight to
God.

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Taking the Crooked, Straight Path begins with hospitality. Hospitality is a many faceted virtue, which reflects the doctrine of Catholic social teaching of the universal destination of goods. Because God offers enough for all, in our compassion we share what we have received as stewards of a great gift. It is not a matter of calculation of potential return but of gratuity, of grace. “To understand another’s distress as one’s own is to recognise that other as a neighbour, whether they are family, a friend or a stranger.”

The grace of reconciliation is lived in lavish recognition of our common receiving. The Samaritan turns aside, recognises the stranger, tends and nurses him at risk and cost, and provides.

Reconciliation is painful; its grace is something that is squeezed out of our mixed motives. A church with which I worked had come near to absolute division. The challenge was to find a means of speaking truth safely to each other. The vicar and those who opposed him were in many cases truly heroic in being willing to listen and willing to change. They saw the distress of the other, recognised the call of God and the demands of grace and responded. But it was neither quick, nor universal. Grace crept into the cracks of the church and began to heal them, and the space for grace was opened by their own knowledge of the love of God. Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

“God’s love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all,”

The complexities of the grace of reconciliation are experienced not only in our inner resistance and desire to circle the wagons, but also in grace having to be expressed as we journey. The Samaritan moved on, and came back. His journey and business continued, and yet he found the crooked, straight path. Journeys

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5 Caritas in Veritate, 2009 para 78
are periods of changing context. For me the journey to parts of Africa, often made, is always a time of tension. The context will shift so rapidly between boarding the aircraft and arriving that I feel fear and weakness, not of what I will find but of the challenge of adapting. A South African Islamic scholar reflecting on the ways of understanding texts in times of oppression wrote, “People’s lives are not shaped by a text as much as shaped by the context”\textsuperscript{6}. The church is called to express reconciliation on the road together, in common journeying, to set a context in the journey. We come to our texts, and find massive differences in understanding, as the recent “Bible in the Life of the Church” report shows, context deeply affects how we understand. Ruth does not speak of understanding but of journey, “where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God, my God.”

Accepting we belong to God together because of His action, determined to express the common gift of grace and the universal goodness of what we have received, we journey together with much difficulty. We are many tribes, but one people. For that to have any possibility of success the journeying must be in truth, responding to the Spirit of God in us calling to the Spirit of God in each other. In journeying we must speak to each other. Silence is not peace. A German Quaker in 1958, speaking with the experience of a defeated and divided nation said “the secret lies in the way in which truth is spoken”\textsuperscript{7}.

But speaking is not endless discussion.


\textsuperscript{7} Idem para 24.34
“Care for the sick and the poor, hospitality to strangers, educational initiatives and peace-making endeavours are all examples of ways in which the church hosts the life together of its neighbours and enables that life to bear witness to its eschatological possibilities.”

We are in a very demanding common journey and fear is an ever present reality. Fear is the opposite of trust and our context is one of fear, a context which infiltrates the church. We do not trust the scientists on science, or the politicians, or the journalists or the Bishops or the bankers. The absence of trust renders all decision making a matter of law and all laws an attempt to cover every possible contingency, a complete impossibility in a world of change and journey.

The possibilities open to a church of reconciled reconcilers are more than we can imagine. Reconciliation touches every aspect of our lives and society, and every aspect of our creation and living in our world. We can be reconcilers of the environment and natural order, of families and communities, of economies and financial services, of families and nations. We will weather the issues of politics and flourish in the storms of societal change.

If we can name and listen, be in conflict but not destruction, take the crooked straight path of reconciliation, we can establish a pattern and model of trust filled living drawing on the grace of God, a model that changes the world. Captured by the grace of God the church has done it before, many times. Different yet feasting together we must be gluttons of the grace of God, like children at a grand birthday party sharing messily what we have been given. Gluttony and grace go together in worship to create trust, and the grace of the Eucharist is where we begin.

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8 Bretherton op. cit. page 150