

This morning our focus is on the interplay between empowerment and responsibility.

We believe, as Christians, that we have been made new by our faith in Jesus, who has reconciled us to God. Being reconciled with God is not like making up after an argument with a family member, and it's not just a change of heart following a spiritual or emotional experience, or a decision that we have made on a particular day. It is so much more than that - Paul describes the reconciled believer as a 'new creation' because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The idea of being a 'new creation' is so much more dramatic and significant than any common concept of 'becoming a Christian'; Paul believes, as well he might given his own conversion story, that when I become a Christian I am re-created, made new in a way that should totally transform my identity, and my behaviour. As he says in Ephesians 4, we should 'put off the old self' and step into the new self that Christ has made in us. We are not the same person we were before; we have been made new, transformed into a child of God, and, as an heir to the Kingdom, reformed in his likeness.

In order to make sense of the great power and responsibility that comes with being 'new creations', we need only look back at the original creation to see what God had always intended for us, and why we need to be reconciled in the first place.

At the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis Chapter 1, we are told all about God's original creation where he empowered human beings but also gave them responsibility for the world around them. Humans were made in God's image, which means that in our natures we bear some of the likeness and characteristics of God Himself. Our design, therefore, holds great power within it: we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made'. Indeed, the poem at the beginning of the Bible even states that he made us distinctly 'male and female', so that together we might reflect much of the power and glory of God. It isn't difficult to see some of that latent power manifest in human behaviour - when we truly love another human, we love in a powerful way that is a foretaste of God's love for all of us; many of us would sacrifice ourselves for our children without much thought - an instinct so clearly rooted in the heart of the Father. When we use our intelligence to create beautiful art or music, or sophisticated technology, or exquisite food, we are exercising some of that power that is inherent in us, because we are made in God's image, and share some of his creative characteristics. When we work together towards common humanitarian purposes, we can achieve great things and bring great light to the world. The Church, at its best, is intended to do exactly that: to be the 'light of the world' like a 'city on a hill', guiding other humans back to God. And certainly, in recent times, we have seen examples of humans making daily sacrifices to protect

others, including total strangers, and that instinct can clearly be identified as an aspect of the image of God, despite our fallen humanity.

It is, of course, tragically the case that the human story is also filled with too many examples of us misusing our inherent empowerment in a way that hurts God, exploits his creation and degrades other humans. Alongside the many inspiring stories of human self-sacrifice, there are of course many examples of exploitation, posturing, arrogance and selfishness. This is what happens when empowerment does not go hand-in-hand with responsibility. Indeed, the story in Genesis goes that Satan's temptation is a posed question about human responsibilities, because he knows that without the counter-weight of responsibility, our empowerment will quickly lead to ruin and self-serving behaviour. Our current world holds too many examples of humans not taking their responsibilities seriously, and the repercussions are devastating.

Again, a cursory look at Genesis 1 tells us that responsibility was always part of the deal when we were designed. We are told in the passage that humans should 'rule over' or 'steward' God's good creation – the animals, seas, plants and birds. All of these things were entrusted to us and we were equipped to have the language, intelligence and strength to make sure that we would be capable of being stewards for His world. We were also designed to work together in community – God stated that it wasn't good for man to be alone – and so he designed us all to be different, like different parts of a body that work together in harmony.

It wasn't long after humans were made that we neglected our responsibilities to use our intelligence wisely. The majority of the Old Testament certainly is a story of how humans repeatedly misused their empowerment and neglected their responsibilities, and in that process disempowered and degraded their own humanity. Looking at our modern world, I don't think this pattern of failure has changed all that much, although our technological powers may have developed over time; it is still the case that, when we misuse our empowerment, we degrade one another, and God's good world.

But Jesus came to break the cycle of misused power and human neglect. He came to show us how to use power properly, to bring healing to those who had experienced degradation and to rebuke those who abused their responsibilities. Here is the most powerful person to walk the Earth, who knew fully the absolute importance of fulfilling His particular responsibilities. Indeed, we read in Matthew 16 that after explaining his responsibility of death and resurrection to his disciples, his close friend Peter questions the legitimacy of the responsibility itself – saying, 'This shall never happen to you'. It is a challenge reminiscent of the Fall, questioning the responsibility that God has placed on Christ's shoulders as

a counter-point to his great power. Jesus, of course, recognises the challenge as the voice of Satan himself, channelled through his well-meaning friend who saw the great power but did not understand the terrible responsibility, or indeed the human need for reconciliation.

Jesus came, as Paul writes, to reconcile us to God again, to make a way for us to return to the original design, empowered by his Spirit and ready to accept our responsibilities. Christ brought about a new creation, a new kingdom, in which, again, human beings could be re-empowered and given the opportunity to fulfil our responsibilities. We find our mission outlined for us afresh here in 2 Corinthians, but rather than the emphasis now on stewarding the Earth, although this is something that remains our responsibility, we have an enhanced role to play in stewarding God's new creation by being Ambassadors, or spokespeople, for this wonderful message of reconciliation we call 'the Gospel'. This new responsibility is not so much different to the old, although the emphasis has changed. We have always been made in God's image, but because of human actions the truth about who God is and what he has done for us has been hidden. It is now our responsibility as his Church to be ambassadors of reconciliation, and that means behaving and speaking as people who are made in his image. It is through living an empowered and reconciled life as God's children that we fulfil our role as ambassadors; it is through us, the Church, that God can be dimly seen, like dull mirrors of the Father and his Son.

We are Christ's Church, and have been mightily empowered through the death and resurrection of Christ – even to the extent that death has lost its sting! – and we have been sent his Spirit to empower us in our new responsibilities. And so Paul implores us to reconcile ourselves to God. We are made in his image, and so we should seek to be like him. And Jesus came not only to reconcile us to the Father, but also to demonstrate what it looks like when human beings live in a way that truly reflect his image, making full use of God's empowerment and fulfilling all his responsibilities. It is a difficult act to follow, but that is why we have been given a helper, and a comprehensive example of what it looks like to get it right.

We have been given the ministry of reconciliation; it is our job to help guide others back to the Father, who longs to live again in right relationships with his people, to walk with us in the cool of the day. We should also continue to take seriously our original responsibility of safeguarding his creation – the natural world, and other humans – the exploitation of which is always the result of humans misusing their God-given gifts. If we don't take seriously the very important ambassadorial responsibilities the Church has been given alongside our empowerment, we find ourselves, like Adam and Eve, falling into Satan's entrapping question, 'Did God really say...?' i.e. Did God really mean it when he gave you this responsibility?' The answer, of course, is 'yes', he did mean to give

us this responsibility, and if we don't take that seriously we can no longer call ourselves his ambassadors, and we would miss out on the fulness of this new creation-life that he has given us.

Jesus illustrates the balance between empowerment and responsibility brilliantly in his parable about servants who are entrusted with bags of gold, found in Matthew 25. In the story, three servants are entrusted with a bag of gold while the Master goes away for a time. Two of the three servants take on the responsibility of his investment in them, and they use the wealth wisely, multiplying the master's original gift and giving it back to him. They are described as 'good and faithful' servants and are invited to share in their master's happiness. The third servant, though, fears failure and misunderstands the responsibility that has been placed on his shoulders; he buries his gold in the ground and only gives back to the Master his original investment. He is sharply rebuked by the Master as a 'wicked and lazy servant' because he does not take seriously the responsibility that comes as part of his empowerment. So, what should we do with the investment and empowerment that God has placed in us? This newly-created life and the empowerment of His Spirit? What we must not do, like the lazy servant, is burying our riches in the earth out of fear that we might lose it or tarnish it. We are challenged to invest wisely, to act as ambassadors for God's reconciliation message on Earth, living lives that exemplify that we no longer belong to this world, but that we have been recreated for a higher purpose. None of us will be a perfect investment and sometimes we might feel that we lose as much as we gain, but it is the heart of the ambassador that God desires in us. Being a 'fisher of people' doesn't mean we catch every fish, but it certainly must mean that we throw out our nets, even if that means we sometimes must brave the storms that are found in the deepest waters. Paul tells us that God is 'making his appeal' to the whole of humanity through us, his Church; there is no higher purpose or responsibility, and it is for this great commission that we have been empowered with gifts, community and the power of His Spirit.

Friends, Christ has so deeply invested in you and I. He has 'died for us all' and this Love ought to 'compel us' to live for him, to make good his investment in our lives and live as ambassadors to the good news that all human beings can now exist in a right relationship with God, 'made new', according to His original design. God is making his appeal through us, he trusts us that much, to bear the responsibility of sharing the good news that we humans can be reconciled to the God that made us. This is why we were made, and this is how we can live fully human lives and in doing so 'become the righteousness of God'.