

Hymns: 498 “God of all power, and truth, and grace”
 479 “The King of love my Shepherd is”
 706 “Longing for the light, we wait in the darkness”

Readings: 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:2

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

Look at the world. People divided. Extremist ideology and radicalisation driving deep chasms in our communities. Mistrust and fear widen those chasms, until joining their sides seems impossible. We need bridges!

The New Testament image for such bridges is “reconciliation.” Two sides divided are reconciled; the separated joined, enemies become friends. The Bible tells us that God has built a bridge between us and himself through Christ. As Christ’s followers, those who have been brought across that bridge, we must become bridge-builders too, to bring people back together again.

I’m an illustrator. Nothing pleases me more than a commission to draw a map or city that has a river because, where there’s a river there will be bridges. And, as you saw earlier, I love drawing bridges!!

London, of course, is my favourite city to draw and I know most of those bridges off by heart, but there are many other bridges around the world that still give me a thrill to draw, Brooklyn Bridge in New York and the majestic Golden Gate in San Francisco for example.

Today, let me talk about a bridge I drew at the beginning of my professional life as part of an illustrated map of Alabama for a US magazine. I stumbled upon the original dust-covered watercolour recently; it shows a small bridge carrying Route 80 across the Alabama River. The place is Selma.

When I first drew it I didn’t really know its significance. I do now. This 1940 built, steel arch bridge was named after US senator and Grand Dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan, Edmund Pettus. There on March 7th 1965 armed State Troopers attacked black civil rights demonstrators with barbed wire clubs and tear gas. The demonstrators were attempting to march across the Bridge and onward to the State capital, Montgomery, peacefully protesting against unjust voting rights for black people.

That march across Selma Bridge was a turning point in American history. Television presented American and international audiences with horrifying images of a brutal attack on defenceless unarmed black marchers left bloodied and severely injured, and roused support for the civil rights movement. President Lyndon B Johnson, forced to listen, eventually assured civil rights leader Martin Luther King that the

National Guard would protect demonstrators on their March 21st 54 mile march to Montgomery. This is what Dr King said when the marchers reached their destination:

'The end we seek is a society reconciled with itself, at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man'

The bridge was not only something that crossed the river. It was an experience that crossed from one way of looking at the world to another.

Just three months ago, I crossed the bridge myself, part of my stay in the States, was a road trip I took with Tammy and Mitch Geiselman, both United Methodist ministers, and friends of Wesley's chapel, through Alabama.

It was a hot and humid afternoon when we reached Selma. I shall never forget crossing that bridge. With each step I felt something happening to me. Many things made sense for the first time. I understood why King and his fight against injustice has been the inspiration behind my personal journey of faith, and why I stand in this pulpit today. In every step I took I felt his struggle for justice and peace.

At the foot of the bridge a small building houses the National Voting Rights Museum. We opened its doors to be greeted by an elderly black lady and her grand-daughter both with very thick Alabaman accents. The older lady knew we had all been moved by walking across that bridge. Before we uttered a word she opened her arms, embraced us, and said: *"I was there with Martin on that day."*

Crossing the bridge was not only a reminder of something that happened in the past but also a recognition of what is happening now. There are many bridges still to cross before that journey ends. Martin Luther King's journey to peace and reconciliation gave him a time honoured place in American history. But it was his Christian faith that strengthened his resolve, that empowered his dream of that "beloved community," a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one's fellow human beings.

All that takes us back to where I began. In his letter to the Ephesians, we see Paul wrestling with division in his world 2000 years ago. He writes about two groups of people, some near, others far away. He describes how Christ tore down the wall that divided them, making two hostile groups into a single humanity. He described a world no longer of strangers or aliens, but where all enjoy full citizenship and equality. And, in the passage from Corinthians, we see just how Martin Luther King's emphasis on reconciliation echoes Paul's dream of a reconciled community functioning as one new creation in Christ, regardless of whether one was Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, slave or free, male or female.

"All this is from God," he writes, "who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ..... God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ."

Paul's revolutionary message is not only a call for our own spiritual relationship with God. It's A CALL FOR ACTION.

God built a bridge between him and US in the embodiment of Christ. Christ came into this World to show us that God wanted to bring us back together with him, through his life of grace and unconditional love, Christ was the bridge of reconciliation with humanity. This is the call for action, if God through Christ can build such a bridge, then as followers, you and I, must become bridge builders ourselves.

One of our deepest callings as Christians is to foster reconciliation wherever we can. We must not leave this responsibility to the Ghandis, Mandelas or kings of this world, but do what we can, where we can.

This bridge building across chasms of race or religion or conflict is no easy task. It requires us to re-order our way of thinking, being and behaving.

When conflict arises in our lives, we must resist that initial reaction to put up a barrier. We put up emotional walls in hope to not get hurt again. We also put up walls in order to keep others out. The irony is, of course, that the very walls we build to protect ourselves end up becoming the prison cell within which we find ourselves trapped. It's bridges we need to build, not walls.

We seem to live in a fear filled world, fear that inhibits bridge building, fed by terror attacks on TV screens and images of biblical numbers of people fleeing war ravaged countries.

Where is hope and reconciliation in all of this, how can it occur in so much darkness.

Well, be inspired. There are people out there doing amazing things in the name of reconciliation. Until recently Canon Andrew White, known as the "vicar of Baghdad" worked tirelessly to support his Baghdad parishioners. His Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation doesn't differentiate between Christian and Muslim. His co-worker a Muslim born dentist Sarah Ahmed, says. "We have our own budget so we can provide for people who have no place to stay – we pay the rent, we distribute food, we visit poor families and give them love and support." White and Ahmed believe focusing on local-based work can provide critical space to regroup and heal.

"Let's love the actual neighbours; let's love the people that are actually persecuted and internally displaced; let's take care of them — and then we will see what will happen to ISIS," they say.

Canon White continues to forge reconciliation with some of Iraq's most influential religious and political leaders. Acting as a vital BRIDGE between Shia and Sunni Muslims, Canon White has worked to reconciling their differences and to build relationships and connections where none previously existed. Bridges can be built, even in seemingly impossible situations.

If 'reconciliation' can happen such dark situations, it can happen too in our communities. You and I *can* welcome the stranger, *can* hold out a hand to an outsider, *can* bridge those social and religious divides.

We *can* go from this place as ambassadors of reconciliation. We *can* bring peace not division. We *can* build bridges over troubled waters.

God has made of one blood all the peoples of the earth. In all we are and do, let us show that to be true.

Amen.