

“The Supreme Reconciliation”
Colossians 1:19-23 (NRSV)

Have you heard that Fred Olsen Cruise Lines, whose parent company Harland and Wolff built **the Titanic**, are planning a **100th anniversary cruise** for **April 2012** on the Balmoral? Tickets are available now, online.

The ship will carry 2,200 passengers, the same number that sailed on the fateful voyage. It will sail on the same route as the Titanic, leaving Southampton in early April, docking briefly at the Irish port of Cobh (formerly Queenstown), where the Titanic made its final call on April 11, 1912. The cruise will continue to follow the route of the Titanic and, on April 14th it will arrive at the exact location the vessel sank, where there will be special memorial ceremonies between 11:40 p.m (when the ship hit the iceberg) and 2:20 a.m. (when the ship sank). (It’s worth mentioning that despite being built in 1988, the Balmoral is unable to sail as fast as the Titanic and will have to leave Southampton earlier than the Titanic did so it can reach the spot where she sank on the anniversary.) After the service, the cruise will continue to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where excursions will include a visit to the Fairview Lawn Cemetery where 121 Titanic victims are buried, before finally arriving in New York.

The whole voyage will be steeped in **Titanic history**. The food served will match the sumptuous menus served on the original voyage. The entertainment will include music and dancing in the style featured in those glorious times. And there will be opportunity to hear first hand from historians who have studied the Titanic story. The 12-night cruise, including flights from New York to Britain, will cost from 2,595 British pounds.

Apart from the **colossal hubris** attached to the building of the Titanic – thinking she was a ship that could never sink, and the **mistakes** that were made in navigating her maiden voyage, there is **another sad note** that many people never hear about and which occurred the night she so tragically struck an iceberg and sank. Certainly, that famous night, there were countless acts of sacrificial love. But with the Titanic gone and her lifeboats spread upon the icy waters among the freezing, crying, drowning survivors, the story needs to mention the appalling display **self-serving cowardice**, for of the 1,508 people who were not able to get into lifeboats, only 13 were picked up by the eighteen half-empty boats that hovered nearby.

In **Boat No. 5**, when **Third Officer Pitman** heard the anguished cries, he turned the boat around and shouted: “Now men, we will pull toward the wreck!” But the passengers protested, “Why should we lose all our lives in a useless attempt to save others from the ship?” Pitman gave in. And for the next hour, No. 5, with 40 people on board and a capacity of 65, heaved gently on the calm Atlantic, while the 40 listened to the fading cry of survivors 300 yards away. The story was much the same on the other boats. In **No. 2**, **Fourth Officer Boxhall** asked the ladies, “Shall we go back?” They said, “No!” so Boat No. 2, about 60 per cent full, drifted aimlessly while her occupants listened callously. On **Boat No. 6**, the situation was reversed as the women begged **Quartermaster Hitchens** to return, but he refused, painting a vivid picture of survivors overwhelming and overturning the boat. The women pleaded as the cries grew fewer. Of the 18 boats, only one boat, **No. 14**, returned to help – and this was an hour after the Titanic’s final descent, when the thrashing crowd had, as witnesses later reported, “thinned out”) Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember*, 1976, p. 70-71).

The me, the personal drama of the event and actions surrounding the sinking of the Titanic is **a parable of a world gone wrong**. Pride goes before destruction (Prov. 16:18). Perilous mistakes get made by inattentive people. And fallen humanity is adrift on the unfriendly sea, alienated, unable to help one another despite some desperate and heroic individual attempts. The wrongness of everything in this scene points to the fundamental problem of people’s estrangement from God, from creation, and from each other by sin. It is a picture of a world desperately in need of reconciliation and the wholeness, the wellness and the rightness that reconciliation will bring.

Even apart from the truths found in the Titanic story, almost 100 years ago, there is no doubt that **the world needs reconciliation**. A long time ago, the inscription on the French sun-king’s, Louis XIV’s cannons read, in Latin, “Ultima ratio regnum” – “**the final argument of kings.**” It’s a saying that is equally descriptive of today’s rocket and missile-studded world, to think only of the nuclear warheads assembled by the most powerful countries in the world, our most beloved democracies among them, and the wanna-be, rogue nuclear power states, like Iran and North Korea. We are as profoundly alienated from God and from each other as we have always been, ever since the Fall. Indeed, it takes no genius to observe that the whole of creation is in desperate need of reconciliation. It is toward this need that Paul has been moving us in our study of his letter to the Colossians, and which he now takes up.

1. God's reconciling pleasure (Col. 1:19-20a).

Paul tells that **God found pleasure in having “all [his] fullness” dwell in Jesus Christ.** Now, Paul's use of the word “fullness” is an intentional slap on the wrists of **the Gnostics**, who used the same word, “**pleroma**,” to denote the totality of all of the thousands of divine emanations from God, or lesser gods” (F. F. Bruce and E. K. Simpson, 1957, p. 206-207). But Paul was saying, “No way!” **Jesus Christ is not one or another of lesser gods; he is divine fullness incarnate!** Later in Colossians 2:9, he puts it even more explicitly: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” “Fullness” means that **the totality of the divine attributes and power** are found “in him.” “The whole fullness – the full fullness” of God is “in him.” Further, it's not temporary. It was, and is there, to stay. It was “in him,” it is now “in him” and it will always be “in him.” Jesus Christ will always be part of what we understand to be as the triune God.

This means we need look no further than Jesus Christ for **the full revelation of God's character.** If God could only be perceived in closely-reasoned theological language, only the most brilliant could understand him. But the fullness of God was in Jesus Christ, and all we have to do is **look at him.** As we **see him** in the Gospels and hear him preached, **we can know what God is like.** It was **God's pleasure to “dwell” in Christ** (cf. Jn. 1:14).

It was **also God's pleasure “to reconcile to himself all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace **through the blood of his cross”** (1:20). God meant to reconcile everything in creation, including creation itself, through Jesus Christ. Certainly, **creation suffered a curse** because of the Fall (Gen. 3:17-18). Elsewhere Paul tells us how the whole creation longs to be released from “futility” – from aimless, meaningless, uselessness:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility.... [But, one day,] the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:20-23).

This is more than poetry. **Creation actually groans.** But it will be brought back, as we will be brought back, by God's redemption and by our obedience to his will, much like as sing at Christmas:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

The land and the seas will lose their hostility. Everything in the world and, indeed, the whole universe will be reconciled, except those who continue to willfully reject him – which brings up the main focus of this verse: the reconciliation of sinners to God.

In every reference to reconciliation between God and humankind in the New Testament, **it is God who takes the initiative** (Rom. 5:10-11; 11:15; Eph. 2:16; 2 Cor. 5:18-20). Reconciliation is an explicitly one-sided process! God does virtually everything for us. All we have to do is to respond positively. All we have to say is, “Yes! Let's make it happen!”

What he want to note here is that “God was pleased” to have his fullness “dwell” in Jesus Christ, and through him to reconcile humanity and the world to himself. Reconciliation is God's joyous work. What good news to a drifting, aimless, lost and drowning world!

2. **God's reconciling method** (Col. 1:20b).

God's method of reconciliation is seen in the concluding phrase of verse 20: **“by making peace through the blood of his cross.”** God's method is **the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.**

Years ago in a western city a husband and wife became estranged and chose to separate. They moved away and lived in different parts of the country. The husband happened to return to the city on a matter of business and went out to the cemetery to the grave of their only son. He was standing by the grave in fond reminiscence when he heard a step behind him. Turning, he saw his estranged wife. The initial impulse of both was to turn away. But they had a common-hearted interest in that grave, and instead of turning away they clasped hands over the grave of their son and were reconciled. **They were reconciled by death!** (Clarence E. McCartney, 1946, p. 297).

Our personal reconciliation to God took nothing less than the death of God's Son, but his death and its effects went far beyond any merely human death. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul put it this way:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself **through Christ**, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, **in Christ** God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors **for Christ**, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you **on behalf of Christ**, be reconciled to God. For our sake **he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** (2 Cor. 5:18-21)

Jesus Christ bore the separation of sin so reconciliation could take place. He made "peace through the blood of his cross" (1:20b). "[He] is our peace" (Eph. 2:14a). "We may not know, we cannot tell what pains he had to bear" or why it had to be this way, "but we believe it was for us he hung and suffered there." Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis' friend said, "Whatever the answer to the problem of evil, this much is true: God took his own medicine." The cross is the ultimate evidence that there is no length the love of God will refuse to go in effecting reconciliation. "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom. 8:32).

It is God's pleasure to give you and I, and everyone else all things. How have we responded to him?

3. **God's reconciling purpose** (Col. 1:21, 22).

God's purpose arises from our miserable condition. In the original Greek, we are described as being "estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (1:21). It's a persistent and permanent condition. That's the way all people are without Christ, but to be truthful, human beings don't like to hear this.

When a great 17th-century Christian woman and encourager of God's servants, **Lady Huntingdon**, invited one of her friends, **the Duchess of Buckingham**, to hear **George Whitefield** preach, she received this reply:

It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive

and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding (Arnold Dallimore, George Whitefield, Vol. 1, p. 132).

Lest you surely think this kind of a dismissive attitude has been superseded today, I remind you we had quite a debate among the members of our church's Task Force on the Revision of the Book of Praise (1997) about whether or not we should remove the phrase **“that saved a wretch like me”** from John Newton's incomparable hymn, “Amazing grace.” Thankfully, if you turn to # 670, you will see that the phrase is still there. We need to be reminded of our sin. All it takes is a telling difficulty, like floating on the cold Atlantic, to find out what is really within.

Humanity's condition is terrible, but God's reconciling purpose is “to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him ...” (1:22). While the Scriptures may paint the darkest possibilities for humankind apart from Christ, they also give us the highest, noblest vision of humankind known to any religious conception anywhere! When one is reconciled to God through Christ, he or she will be presented as holy, without blame, and beyond reproach. These believers will be “children of God, and if children, then heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:16b-17). If we have been reconciled, this is our position before God, and it will be increasingly true of us as we grow more and more into his image.

R.C. Sproul tells us:

Luther used a simple analogy to explain it. He described the condition of a patient who was mortally ill. The doctor proclaimed he had medicine that would surely cure him. The instant the medicine was administered, the doctor said his patient was better. Of course, at that instant, the patient was still sick, but as soon as the medicine passed his lips and entered his body the patient began to get well. So, said Luther, it is with our reconciliation. As soon as we truly believe, that very instant we start to get better; the process of becoming pure and holy is underway and its future completion is certain.

(The Holiness of God, 1985, p. 214)

Fellow-believers, in light of our reconciliation with God and each other, paid for by the costly death of Christ, **we ought to do everything in our power**

to be blameless and holy in this life. We must become who we are in the Lord. We must submit ourselves ever more completely to the “God who is at work in [us], enabling [us] both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Php. 2:13).

4. **God’s reconciling condition** (Col. 1:23).

This will happen, says Paul, “**provided that you continue** securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (1:23). Paul isn’t expressing doubt as to whether or not the Colossians will continue on in their faith, hope and love. He’s simply saying, “At any rate, if you stand firm in the faith – and I am sure you will – this will happen” (Peter O’Brien, 1982, p. 69). The application of Paul’s words are this: **the gospel doesn’t work like magic**. Our **minds**, our **hearts** and our **wills must be involved**.

Our **minds** must feed on Christ and his Word. That will give us direction for life. Our **hearts** are to focus on him in love. That will give us energy and power. Our **wills** are to take their practice and pattern from him. That will give us a model to follow. Present faith, hope and love will lead to present and future results.

It is imperative that all of us **be reconciled to God** in Jesus Christ. It’s the only effective thing to do. Without true reconciliation we’ll remain adrift on the cruel, cold seas – alienated from God, alienated from creation, and alienated from each other, though we may wish otherwise. **God wants us to be reconciled. God enjoys reconciliation.** God’s Son -- “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” -- “endured the cross, disregarding its shame” – “for the sake of the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2). What God has in mind for us is the greatest vision, the best thing, ever conceived for any mortal. There is only one thing to do and that is to say, “Yes! Bring it on!”

Amen

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