

Sermon Representation 17.06.18
2 Corinthians 5:14-21 (*The Message*) Julian Templeton

One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat. He included everyone in his death so that everyone could also be included in his life, a resurrection life... (1 Cor. 5:14-15)

We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. (18)

There are two points I want to make today:

1. Jesus's death was a representative death.
2. We who share in this death and new life are commissioned as Jesus's representatives.

Representation is common. Each of you will have represented another person sometime. That is, you have stood in for someone else, taken their place, filled-in, done something on someone else's behalf. What I'm doing now, and what Andrew will do later when he leads us in prayer, what Richard does when he plays the organ, is representative. And the same is true for the door stewards and the refreshment-servers, each of person does not do these things for himself or herself; we do these duties for you as worshippers because we are representing St John's Church. In a similar way, representation is common in marriage, in family life, among friends, at work, and in voluntary organisations: we routinely do things for others, and when we do so, we act representatively.

The Apostle Paul regards Jesus Christ as his and our representative. In particular, Paul regards Jesus's death as representative, but in a radical way.

One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat.

Or in a more literal translation:

One person died for all; therefore all have died.

We are used to understanding Jesus's death as a substitution: that he died *for* others, by which we mean *in the place of* others. But Paul is saying much more here: he is saying that Jesus's death was universally representative in that when he died, *all humankind died with him*.

I expect that most of us will find this a puzzling thing to assert. Did Paul really mean it? Was he getting carried away with his own rhetoric at this point? Did his amanuensis, who was taking down the apostle's words in full flow, misunderstand Paul's argument here? Did subsequent copyists of 2 Corinthians make an error? The phrase 'One person died for all; therefore all have died' seems to make no sense at all. Yet I think this phrase would have made perfect sense to Paul, because Paul would have understood Jesus's death on the cross as an act of atonement in continuity with the Israelite and Jewish understanding of Atonement.

When an animal was brought to the temple as a sacrifice for a person's sin, the person would place his or her hand on the animal and identify him or herself with that animal. It was the person's own sin, his or her own wrongdoing, that had brought the necessity for atonement to be made. In placing

one's hand upon an innocent animal, the worshipper would identify himself or herself with the animal, and in particular would identify with its death. The worshipper would in identifying with the animal representatively die to that sin. And once the animal had been sacrificed, its life-blood would be sprinkled over the altar and onto the worshipper to purify the worshipper from sin. The worshipper would in this way participate in the animal's death by dying to un-holiness and coming alive once more to holiness. (see Leviticus 16-17)

While most or all of us may find this practice and theology of animal sacrifice repellent and barbaric, we ought to consider what lies behind it. What lies behind it is an understanding that if human sin and wrongdoing is not dealt with and removed, its continuing effects will have terrible and sometimes deadly consequences. For example, so-called blood feuds and vendettas can blight families and whole communities: as continuing gang violence today and its, often, young and black victims bear terrible witness. Or take preventable accidents, such as the Grenfell Tower Fire, with its 72 victims and the continuing trauma and grief suffered by relatives, friends and survivors. When people feel aggrieved and angry, we still struggle to find ways of resolving that grief and anger. What is needed, arguably, is some kind of process of *atonement*. A process whereby the wrong is acknowledged, contrition is expressed, where, if possible, restitution or repair-of-wrong is made, and all those involved are able to live without the past wrong continually marring and souring their present lives. The 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in South Africa was once such example in the recent past; the Grenfell Tower Inquiry <https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk> is a present-day example.

So when Paul writes—one man died for everyone, which puts everyone in the same boat—that, at least, acknowledges that in Jesus's representative death, we are in some sense *all* included. That is, every one of us, we who all make mistakes, we who all hurt others inadvertently or deliberately, we who all bear hurts and regrets—we are all included in Jesus's death; there are no exceptions, we are all 'in the same boat'. Jesus died representatively for us; but we, equally, by faith and trust in Jesus, may participate in his death. That is, we may actually *put to death* that hurt and regret. We won't be able to forget it; but what we may be enabled to do is recall it in such a way that it no longer mars and sours our life in the present. And this is where *forgiveness* is crucial. The whole point of atonement is that because God forgives our sin and wrong; we are liberated to be people who, in turn, forgive others. And this is where the constructive side of atonement comes into play.

[Jesus] included everyone in his death so that everyone could also be included in his life, a resurrection life, a far better life than people ever lived on their own.

As Christians, we ought not to think that we are any better than anyone else; but what ought to be willing to share with others is that, by God's grace, we have been included in Jesus's resurrection life, and in practice we find that it is a far better life than we could live on our own. And this brings me to my second point:

2. We who share in Jesus's death and new life are commissioned as his representatives.

Those looking at us would not think that there was anything very different about us; but inwardly, we are those 'united

with Christ, created new, for whom the old life has gone; a new life burgeons!' (17) That is, we are, bit-by-bit, realising what being a Christian means: our new self 'in Christ' no longer has to dwell on past hurts; it no longer has to nurse grudges; rather, we are able to be people who know that they are forgiven and who are able to forgive others and move on. Equally, we are people who are no longer paralysed by self-doubt and self-accusation, because our new self 'in Christ' is set free to be confident and to rely upon the life-giving grace of God that is able to make right our wrongs.

Surely this is something that is far too good and life affirming to keep to oneself? Of course it is! This is why:

We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. (18)

This ought to be the focus of our daily discipleship; not ignoring differences but affirming that difference does not have to result in conflict because at the most important level we are actually the same: each person is one for whom Jesus has representatively died and been raised to new life. As such, we are Christ's representatives to others: testifying to his once-and-for-action that is, in our experience as time-bound creatures, work-in-progress.

Perhaps one of the more effective ways of communicating what reconciliation means in practice is to put it in the language of friendship, which is what Eugene Peterson does in *The Message*:

Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you. How? you say: In Christ. God put on him the wrong who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God. (20-21)

God has already taken the initiative by offering friendship to us; every person should be given the opportunity to respond to God's offer of friendship. One of the most effective ways of demonstrating this 'friendship-with-God' is when we offer friendship: by spending time with others, offering help to others, accepting help from others, and by inviting friends to a church event or service. These some practical ways we can express our discipleship as Christ's representatives.

The hymn we will sing in a moment encourages us in our mission as representatives. We never engage in mission alone but always do so as part of the Church and in fellowship with Jesus:

One in the faith we share,
out in his name we go;
Jesus awaits us there,
longing that all should know
that 'Christ has died and Christ is risen,
in Christ shall all be made alive.'¹

Thanks be to God.

¹ 'This is the truth we hold' by Basil Bridge. Hymn 607 in *Rejoice and Sing*, © The United Reformed Church, Oxford University Press, 1991