

HOT TOPIC: RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN

SERMON FOR ST PAUL'S ANGLICAN BORONIA. 30TH JULY 2006

I was the captain of the Pinafore

And a right good captain too

I was very very good and be it understood

I commanded a right good crew.

I was never known to quail at the fury of a gale

And I was never ever sick at sea.

Well hardly ever.

I see some of you recognise these lines. They come from HMS Pinafore. One of the many famous musicals written by Gilbert and Sullivan. Even today nearly 150 years after they were written, the musicals of Gilbert and Sullivan are often revised, refreshed and trotted out. Pirates of Penzance, The Mikado, The Gondoliers.

When I was in Year 12, I had the good luck to be cast as the Captain of the HMS Pinafore in the Brisbane Boys' College production of Gilbert and Sullivan's HMS Pinafore. In those less enlightened days, since it was a boys school, the female parts were played by the younger lads. Which seems a bit creepy to me now, but those were more innocent days. It certainly must have looked odd. Every bass and tenor was six foot tall and every soprano and alto was four foot tall. It looked like a co-production with the Hobbits.

One would imagine, given the enormous success of Gilbert and Sullivan, that the two men were the closest of friends. Such a close collaboration must have meant a close, intimate understanding. A collaboration of like minds and unified passions, surely.

No. Completely wrong. Gilbert and Sullivan may have started out OK, but their relationship soon descended into complete breakdown.

Gilbert was an expert in the dramatic arts. He was a theatre writer and director whose abilities were only exceeded by his ego. He was arrogant, proud, certain about everything, and the boss of everyone.

Sullivan's problem wasn't so much his ego. His problem was the way he saw himself. He saw himself as a serious musician. He was writing symphonies and real opera. To Sullivan, Gilbert was just another pop song writer. And every now and then Sullivan, because it paid mightily well, had to lower himself and set music to Gilbert's tawdry text. For Sullivan it was as if Beethoven was being asked to write pop tunes for Kylie Minogue.

Soon after they started working together, they stopped seeing each other. Gilbert would write his lyrics and post them to Sullivan on the other side of town. Sullivan would write the music, and post it back.

Their relationship got worse and worse until finally they had a falling out over the price of some carpet. This trivial matter ended with a court case in which they were on opposite sides. The relationship had broken down completely.

Relationships are difficult, aren't they?

People are hard to work with. I joked with my Human Resources Manager just this week that the place would run a lot better if we didn't have to deal with people all the time!

Relationships are hard.

Sometimes it seems like we are only one bad word away from a relationship breakdown. One misdirected glance, and the relationship is in trouble. One grumpy grunt and the relationship is shaky.

Today, I have been asked to talk about "Relationship Breakdown." Now I imagine when we hear the phrase, Relationship Breakdown, we think of couples separating or divorcing. Or maybe we think about teenagers running away from home. Or maybe we know of situations in which children haven't been able to talk to parents for years. Or maybe we think of Israelis and Lebanese.

Certainly these are example of relationship breakdown. But I think relationships are just so tricky that every day we experience mini-breakdowns. A hasty ill-thought word that hurts someone. The relationship breaks. Maybe only for a few minutes. We apologise. Or we make a joke of it. Or if the hurt is directed towards ourselves, we just say "Get over it" and we do.

The question I would like to explore this morning is how we, as Christians, are supposed to handle relationship breakdown? Does the Bible have anything to say about relationship breakdown? Did Jesus give us guidelines or rules about how we are to handle relationship difficulties in his Kingdom?

Well, of course the answer is Yes. The Bible does have a lot to say about relationship breakdown. And Jesus does give us guidelines and rules about how we are to handle relationship difficulties.

Let's look at the story we heard read to us just now. The story of the lost son, or as it used to be called the "prodigal" son. Prodigality is not a label we commonly use today, but it continues to be the proper label. Because the lost son is not only *lost* he also enormously wasteful. One might say that a prodigal person is *prodigiously wasteful*. *Prodigal* and prodigious have the same root.

Not only that, he has caused his father and his family great hurt by his actions. In the society of Jesus' time, it was considered outrageous, even unheard of, for a son were to request his inheritance before his father were dead. He would be saying, in effect, "I wish you were dead!"

In any case, after prodigiously wasting that inheritance, he hits rock bottom and comes to his senses. And what does he do? He decides to go home and say sorry. He decides to repent of his sin. You might not have noticed that he does not ask, nor does he expect, to

be reconciled with his father. He just hopes his father will give him a job—treat him like one of his workers.

So he repents without expectation of reconciliation—without any hope that he will be able to make things right with his Dad. He just realises that this is the right thing to do. He must repent of his sin.

And what happens when he comes home? Of course, we all know, that his Father forgives him. In fact, his father is a prodigal too. Because his forgiveness is enormous, over-the-top, prodigious. The father doesn't just say "Thanks for saying sorry." He runs to welcome the son. He gives him a big bear hug. He restores him to his place as a son within the family. He has a big party to let everyone know that reconciliation has taken place.

You know, I love that image of the father running to the son. I love it because in Middle Eastern society, even today, it would seem so unseemly. So improper for a dignified, community leader to pull up his long flowing robe and RUN down the street. I remember a reception I attended in Beirut some years ago when all the local religious leaders came together—various kinds of Christians and Muslims. They were all wearing their long elegant robes that distinguished the importance and significance of their office. Their long robes touched the ground so you couldn't see their feet. And they entered the room as if they were gliding. Like swans on water.

And it made me think then, if any one of them would hitch up their skirts to run across the room to embrace a lost son. And if they did, how everyone would be shocked and probably criticise them for such improper behaviour.

But here the father casts all care to the wind. And he RUNS towards reconciliation. And Jesus, telling the story, is saying *See how much the Father wants to forgive his son?*

Because, of course, this story is about us and God. We are the prodigals, and God is the Father.

And there are many wonderful and encouraging messages in this famous story, but I only want to emphasise one this morning.

You see, Jesus wants us to see that there is a simple formula for fixing broken relationships.

The simple formula is:

Forgiveness + Repentance = Reconciliation.

Reconciliation occurs when the relationship is restored, made right, fixed up. When the brokenness is healed.

And how do we bring about restored relationships? How do we become reconciled?

Well, according to Jesus it's really very simple. Forgive and Repent.

Forgiveness + Repentance = Reconciliation.

Perhaps I should have said I have good news and bad news. The good news is that Jesus gives us a very simple formula. The bad news is that the formula is very difficult to apply in real life.

In fact, most of the time, all of us, myself included, use different ways of trying to fix up a broken relationship. Unfortunately, Jesus does not give us a Plan B. He does not give us an alternate strategy. He just says:

Forgiveness + Repentance = Reconciliation.

But this is so hard to do, that most of us try something else first.

How many of us have said, "You started it." Or, "It's your fault."

When a relationship fractures our natural tendency—our human, sinful tendency—is to look for someone to blame.

We accuse. We scapegoat. We even find ourselves saying completely ridiculous things like "You think ... this, or you believe ... that." As if anyone really knows what someone else thinks. We slip so easily into self-justification mode. Obviously I am right. Obviously it can't be my fault if I am hurting. So I *accuse* you.

Or maybe we just prefer to carry the grudge. When the relationship breaks down, we feel disabled and hurt. We take that hurt into our hearts and we let it breed and fester into hate.

And then, maybe we turn that hate into gossip. Oh there's a good technique for healing broken relationships. Say bad things about them. But do it quietly. Indirectly. Not to their face. Behind their back. And subtly. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, say no more.

Or maybe we try the Clint Eastwood technique. Hit 'em back. And hit 'em harder. "Go ahead, make my day!" The famous Dirty Harry line that typifies the idea that violence can be defeated by greater violence.

Obviously there are many people in the world who do not find this proposition as breathtakingly stupid as I do.

But at least I am in good company with Jesus. Jesus says a big, loud NO, one might say a PRODIGIOUS No. He says No to accusation. No to grudges and gossip. No to violence.

It is no longer an eye for an eye. That is the world's rule. It is not Jesus' rule.

If someone hits you on the cheek, offer them the other cheek.

And there is no Plan B. Jesus doesn't say "OK, if forgiveness doesn't work, smash his face in." He just says:

Forgiveness + Repentance = Reconciliation.

Our Christian responsibility in the face of relationship difficulties of any kind is to either forgive or repent. That's it. That's all of it. Forgive. Repent.

The Bible is very clear about this. We can be in no doubt about what a Christian is supposed to do.

If I have been sinned against, Jesus says my response must be to forgive. Must be.

If I have sinned, Jesus says my response must be to repent. Must be.

No secondary strategy, no other response. We must forgive. We must repent.

Only through forgiveness and repentance can there be reconciliation.

This is what Jesus said, and it is what he modelled in his own life and ministry.

Jesus began his ministry with a call to repentance. He ended his life with a call to forgiveness.

Mark records the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Mark chapter 1 verse 14:

"Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God. 'The time has come' he said, 'The kingdom of God is near. REPENT and believe the good news.'"

And at the end of his ministry, Jesus is about to die on the cross, and Luke records Jesus' words in Luke 23:34: "Father FORGIVE them, for they do not know what they are doing."

And later, when Jesus reappears to the disciples, Luke records these as the last words of Jesus to his disciples: "Repentance and Forgiveness of sins will be preached in the name of Christ to all nations."

Now, I'll bet one or two of the better Biblical scholars here will be trying to work out how, if Jesus rejected violence, he became violent in the temple. You remember the scene. Jesus comes into the temple. Turns over the tables of the money changers and pigeon sellers. Makes a little whip and drives them off.

Was Jesus being violent?

Well, there's a whole long discussion to be had here. But we need to recognise what the temple was really like. The temple of Jerusalem was not like St John's Cathedral. It was not a quiet, reverent, stained-glass place with a soft pipe organ playing in one corner.

The temple was an abattoir. Blood sacrifice was the daily ritual. Every day. All day long. Animals were being slaughtered all the time. The temple was filled with the animal screams as they were murdered. The place was awash with blood. The temple had special drains to take the streams of blood out of the temple and into a field beyond the city wall, where the blood dried and was used as fertiliser by local farmers. The priests' clothes were spattered and soaked in blood.

The temple was a temple of ritual blood sacrifice.

Into this temple comes Jesus. His goal is not violence, but a sign. He wants to show them a sign. He wants a demonstration. A demo.

Jesus wants to overturn the world of violence and blood sacrifice and replace it with a world of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation.

He wants to demonstrate that he, Jesus the Christ, replaces the temple as the centre of worship.

So he turns over a few tables, and frightens off the inhabitants. It was more street theatre than violence.

But back to our point. If the Biblical revelation is clear about anything, it is clear about how we are to respond to broken relationships.

Forgiveness + Repentance = Reconciliation.

That is why we have to say Sorry to indigenous Australians. And that's why indigenous Australians have to forgive the Whitefellas.

And note something else here. If we are forgiving, we cannot insist the other person repent. And likewise, if we are repenting, we cannot insist that the other person forgive.

It is our responsibility to do our part. The prodigal son repents not knowing what will happen. Indeed, he expects nothing from the Father.

And the Father runs to the son, not knowing anything other than that he has returned.

Their two actions are not mutually conditional. The father's forgiveness is not conditional upon the son's repentance. The son's repentance is not conditional upon the father's forgiveness. The two actions are independent.

But reconciliation, the restoring of broken relationships, IS dependent on both occurring.

Forgiveness + Repentance = Reconciliation.

We are to take our lead from the God who created us, and asks us to model our lives on him and his values.

As we read in 1 John 1:9 this morning, *If we confess our sins* (that is, if we REPENT), *he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* That is, we shall be reconciled with God. If we repent, he will forgive, and our broken relationship will be restored.

That is what we do, every time we come to the sacrament of Holy Communion. We ritually confess our sins and accept God's forgiveness, and our relationship with Him is made right.

But Jesus asks us not only to be reconciled with God, but before we come to the altar to be reconciled with one another. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:23 Jesus says "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Friends, let us try. Let us try to set aside the world's ways of dealing with relationships. Let us try the way God has modelled for us in his own behaviour.

Forgive

Repent

Be reconciled with one another.

A-men