

# God's Action

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[ 0 : 00 ] I think it's probably very appropriate that the announcement comes on April Fool's Day.

I have been away for the past two Wednesdays and have thought about you a lot and thought about this gathering on Wednesdays a lot.

And, you know, wondered about what the kind of basic contract is between me and you and how we continue to meet. It's always a great encouragement to see the food on the table.

So I know that at least those who have prepared it are still behind this undertaking. And I'm always enormously encouraged by Lisa and just the vision she has and the commitment she's made to this work and the fact that she keeps it going week after week.

And I'm very grateful to her for that. And I need response from you sometimes and sometimes I need a lot of encouragement.

[ 1 : 28 ] And it's certainly very encouraging to, you know, to have received that gift and that card for which I am very grateful indeed. We had an early morning service this morning and read the gospel for this week, which is the story of Jesus and the five barley loaves and the three small fish.

And it just, you know, it proceeded when Christ turns to Philip and says, Philip, where are we going to find bread that these may eat?

You know, and you look at the city and you look at the people in the city and the downtown and you see the sort of tremendous need that there is in people's lives.

And you wonder, how do you, how do you ever do it? And Philip replies, well, 200 pennyworths of bread wouldn't be enough to feed all these people that we haven't a sufficiency.

And of course, that's the world that we look at all the time. We look around us and we see needs way beyond anything that we can figure out how they would ever be met.

[ 2 : 40 ] And we see individual people sometimes have such enormous personal needs. Groups of people have enormous personal needs. And when Jesus pointed the crowd out to Philip and said, we're going to feed these people.

And Philip said, there's no way we could do that. And yet they were fed and there was food left over. And it all started with the gift of one boy with five barley loaves and three fish.

And I would like to think that, I mean, my sort of rationale is that if I can bring five barley loaves and three fish to these meetings from time to time, that God might wonderfully feed all sorts of people and all sorts of needs simply because of Jesus taking the words and using them in people's lives. Well, that's my side of it. The other side of it, of course, is yours. And what do you need? And I wonder what you need out of coming here on a Wednesday.

I'm strongly, you know, aware that when I'm in the business I'm in talking to congregations, most people really are very often people get very excited by what I have to say.

[ 4 : 13 ] And they know exactly the persons to whom it should be applied. But it's not them, you know. And so that religion becomes people sort of cheering you on so that you can get that guy over there.

Or they have wonderful ideas about how somebody else could hear this. But the fact is that we are all in the position where we need to be able to hear.

And we need to be able to hear more than the rantings of an April Fool. We need to hear the Word of God.

You know that wonderful passage from the Psalms, which is quoted again in the epistle to the Hebrews, which we looked at this morning. And again, it says, you know, Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart.

And with all that is coming in on us on a daily basis, the voices that we hear, the kind of cacophony of voices screaming at us all day long, and in the midst of that, the importance of hearing the voice

of our God as he speaks to us is very important.

[ 5 : 35 ] It's, I guess, true that we have deep hungers and a hunger that man cannot satisfy by bread alone, but that this hunger in us is a hunger that can ultimately only be satisfied by the Word of God.

And without it, we start, you know, Amos uses the very sort of picturesque way of describing famine.

He said of a people, their teeth are very clean, you know, because they haven't eaten anything for months, you know, that they haven't been used. And that's how he, and spiritually, we, our teeth are sometimes too clean because we haven't been fed anything.

So, I think that that's the kind of contract that we need to pray for and we need to work through in these sessions on Wednesdays.

And I think you have a very important part in the contract. And we need to pray that God will meet us and speak to us through his Word.

[ 6 : 56 ] I mean, that's what we're after. Anyway, look at the text there. And the text, and I want you to begin at verse 19, which is just outside of the box, where it says, and this is Paul writing his letter to a young church in Colossae, a church that is vibrant, a church where people have been converted, a church where people have come to put their faith in Jesus Christ, a church that has formed of a community of believers.

And within the first generation, already it's having problems. All, I mean, if you have problems in your church, you can take great consolation from knowing that more than half the New Testament was written to churches that have problems and trying to help them sort them out.

So that's part of what happened. So it was the church in Colossae. One of the problems was concerning the fullness of God. And in order to put this in perspective, this is the kind of thing that I think is being referred to by the fullness of God.

You see, what Paul says quite categorically here, if you look at verse 19, for in him, that is, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Now, we live in a world which, like the world of the Colossians, thinks that the fullness of God has got to be approached by various things like mysticism, elaborate and secret rituals, transcendental meditation.

[ 9 : 04 ] It needs to be, there's moral perfection. And all these things are the means by which we enter in to the fullness of God, perhaps even reincarnation or out-of-body experiences or something like that.

But you'll know that the church in Colossae was faced with the problem that they wanted to, they wanted, they were, because they had, they had now put their faith in Christ, they were very susceptible to religion.

And it's dangerous to be susceptible to religion because there's so many people outselling it. And being susceptible to religion, what they were told was that the fullness of God was something you approached through things like reincarnation, moral perfection, transcendental meditation, secret ritual, mysticism, and so on.

All those things would lead you eventually on a journey into which you would experience the fullness of God. That's how it was understood.

And that's what Paul means when he writes to them and makes this very dramatic statement that in Christ, this down here represents our world, and he says, in Christ, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

[ 10 : 56 ] It's all here in him. Now, the argument that was presented to the Colossians, the argument that was still presented is, well, this is a very good thing in and of itself, and nobody should be bothered about believing that, but if you want to go on and find out who God really is, this is the way you do it.

You enter into all these wonderful experiences. But Paul is not just apologizing, he is making a profound assertion that all the fullness of God has chosen, God has chosen to dwell, to abide in, in him, in Christ.

Now, you could say that God has chosen to dwell in this palace, or God has chosen to dwell in this temple, or God has chosen to live in a cloud, a great thundercloud that surrounds the top of a mountain from which he can boom forth instructions to people.

You can say all those things, but that's not what Paul says. Paul says the fullness, the completeness, the wholeness, all that you can ever know about God abides in Jesus Christ. And that's why Christians are rather addicted to the person of Jesus Christ, because that's the understanding that we are to have of him, is that the fullness of God is in him.

[12:37] Now, we're in the epistle to the Colossians now, and I started by telling you the story of the miracle of the man who took the five loaves, and the fish took them in his hands, and broke the loaves, and gave thanks, and distributed them, and 5,000 people were fed, and there was an abundance of things left over.

That man, and that's a delightful story, isn't it? And it's one of many delightful stories about the life and ministry of Jesus.

But you see, within a generation, it wasn't just the man who broke the bread. It is now the one who, in human life, God dwelt in all his fullness, that all the fullness of God was manifested in this person. Now, that idea is totally alien to the world in which we live. But there is another alienation that it goes on to talk about here. Look at verse 21.

And here, in verse 21, you have the stranger, in a sense, the lonely stranger who's here in verse 21, and it says this about him.

[14:06] If you look, he's a strange, he's hostile in mind, and he's doing evil deeds. That is, those three things are characteristic of him.

His estrangement, now, that could be psychological estrangement, but basically it means that you don't belong to the covenant, you don't belong to the community, you don't belong.

And you know that there's lots of situations that you enter into in the course of your life, or in the sophisticated city in which we live, where you're made very much aware that you don't belong.

And so there is this, this estrangement of being outside the covenant, not having any basic agreement with the people among whom you live.

There is hostility. Hostility, it says, in mind, and that's the second characteristic of this lonely stranger, is hostility of mind, and that that's the discovery in yourself that there is a basic hostility towards God.

[15:31] Now, that's easy to run into. A lot of people give expression to that hostility by disapproving of the way God does things.

And they can build a very strong case, and a very strong case is put by many people in our culture and in our society.

This hostility of mind towards God is one of the real dimensions of our world and our culture and our society at the moment.

There is real hostility. God is paternalistic. God is authoritarian. God is removed from the situation so that this hostility of mind is a perennial condition of human beings.

They have this hostility, and you don't have to scratch people very deeply to discover this hostility. Like, I go around visiting people as a pastor and meet people and get down and talk to them and sit with them, and what inevitably comes out almost all the time is basic hostility towards the church, towards Christians, and towards God.

[17:00] This hostility of mind is very present in our society. The third thing that it says about this is that it results in evil deeds, and that's only because you know that what you do expresses the condition of your heart and mind.

Our behavior expresses that. Now, what you have here, then, is the basis of the irreconcilable relationship between God and man.

That's the condition that we find in our world. people. You cannot reconcile God and man. You can't bring them, God and humanity, you can't bring them together.

And, you can't bring them together because of this estrangement, because of this hostility of mind, and because people have acted things out.

Now, it's not, I mean, if you take, the thing that I would like just to leave with you as part of your thinking today is that this irreconcilable nature that we have expresses itself in all sorts of ways.

[18:34] The hospital workers are irreconcilably opposed to those who are running the hospital. And the hockey players are irreconcilably opposed to the people that run the hockey business.

And university workers are irreconcilably opposed. And you find that the whole of our society is based on the fact of irreconcilable opposites.

The Quebecois and the Cree are feeling somewhat irreconcilable over the loss of a \$17 billion contract. And you can go on and on and on.

And when you get into people's personal lives, you find a man is irreconcilably broken with his wife. And a wife feels irreconcilably alienated from her husband.

And a brother feels irreconcilably separated from his brother. And I met a magnificent lady yesterday who I don't see very often but she told me a long story of the buildup of a totally irreconcilable relationship to her sister.

[ 19 : 51 ] And this irreconcilability is something that it's very easy to find. And that the whole of our world tends to be breaking down between Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Arabs, Serbs and Croatians, and on and on it goes as we are getting into our ethnic identities or other kind of differences that we have with the rest of the world so that if this process goes on, there will be as many nations of people in the world as there are people in the world.

We'll all live in nations of splendid isolation from one another. And this will be the kind of fulfillment of all our rights finding expression in our world.

And there we will be. And it will be the expression in our world of the estrangement we have with God, the hostility of mind we have towards Him, and the evil deeds we do to express this.

And that's where the problem is. Now, I think you have to see that and you have to see how in any office you get irreconcilable elements trying to work together.

And it's part of, and this was, I mean, this was, I think, the wisdom of Karl Marx is that he recognized that you could turn people on people.

[ 21 : 25 ] And out of that irreconcilable business you could, you could generate a whole lot of activity. And so irreconcilability of my values with your values, of my rights with your rights, and on and on means that you generate a huge business, but the end result of it is that the whole of humanity is living without relationship to one another and without relationship to God.

And that, as you will see, and I don't want to be painfully obvious about it, is why you're told to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, strength, and body, and your neighbor is yourself. But in a world in which the basic reality is the irreconcilability of people with people, how do you do it? I mean, that's the nature of our kind of world.

And so when you come to look at the text again on the basis of that, then you see what I think is the strongest claim possible when it says that in him in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven making peace by the blood of his cross.

In other words, somebody, something has happened in our world saying that there is grounds for reconciliation.

[ 23 : 03 ] reconciliation. I don't know whether this is relevant or not, but I'll leave you to think about it. But there's two words, and I don't know whether I've got enough S's in there or too many.

But you know that there's tremendous energy generated by nuclear fission, which is the breaking down of atoms.

And the breaking down of them generates tremendous energy. But what would far surpass that is if you could create nuclear fusion, which is the joining together.

Well, that's the kind of world we live in, which irreconcilability generates a tremendous amount of energy. But if you could ever get the opposite happening, if you could ever get reconciliation taking place, it would generate even more energy.

And amazing things would happen. So it's kind of like that. And you get that story being told by Paul here when he says that through Jesus Christ, God has reconciled to himself all things, whether on earth or heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

[ 24 : 34 ] That God has provided a ground for reconciliation. That's the business that God is in.

If you look on in the next verse, you will see, you who were once estranged, hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

So that what you get is a basis on which God has been reconciled to us. That is, through Christ, that reconciliation has been established.

God is reconciled to us. Now, we need to be reconciled to him. The grounds of reconciliation is established from God's side in that he has been reconciled to us through Jesus Christ, in whom the whole fullness of God dwelt bodily, and by Christ's death on the cross and the shedding of his

blood, the grounds of reconciliation, have been established.

Now, I was very convicted by this passage. I guess I'm going to have to quit. But I was very convicted by this passage because having been in the ministry for a long time, I tend to think of my ministry as going around helping this person who doesn't like the hymns we sing, and this person who doesn't like the way the church is decorated, and this person who thinks that we ought to get some different preacher, and this person who thinks the sermon ought to be shorter, and this person who doesn't like the Sunday school, and I go around trying to build a little reconciliation in and say, well, we're really not so bad, and we're pretty much like you are anyway, so why don't you join us, and we won't be any worse.

[ 26 : 43 ] trying to reconcile people that way, but basically that's not what the ministry is about.

What the ministry is about is to say to you, God is reconciled to you through Christ, so what are you going to do about it? That's what's happened.

You can't go on raging and fuming and railing against God down through eternity, because God has reconciled himself to you in Jesus Christ, and it's up to you to respond.

If you want to ignore it, you can. If you want to pretend it hasn't happened, you can, but the fact is that it has happened, and when it says reconciled here, what it means by that is that the it's done, it's finished, it's completed, there's nothing left to be done.

It's been done. God is reconciled to you. While you and I are still sinners railing against God in our fury and in our anger, in our hostility of mind by evil deeds and in a sense of estrangement, God has been reconciled to us through Christ's death on the cross.

[ 28 : 07 ] That's what reconciliation is. So that the work of the church is in a sense to produce spiritual fusion rather than fission.

You know, everybody says religion is what makes people divide all the time, that they don't like. Well, what God has done in Christ is to bring people together, not separate them, to bring them together from their common inheritance of estrangement, hostility, and evil deeds, to bring them together through by reason of the fact that God has overcome his irreconcilable relationship to us. He has overcome that in Christ, in whom the whole fullness of God has dwelt. And that the challenge for us as people is, how are you going to respond?

Your life is to be a response to the fact that God has established a basis of reconciliation. reconciliation. Do you know what that means?

It means, I don't know if I'll tell you this or not, but it means that the murdered relates to the murderer.

[ 29 : 43 ] The raped relates to the rapist. And you know how utterly impossible that is, don't you? The subject of child abuse relates to the abuser.

Why? Because God has established a basis of reconciliation, a profound basis of reconciliation. And even the areas in which we consider that the situation is irreconcilable, God has provided a basis for reconciliation.

And we don't want to give up on all the things that we have only learned to live with by saying they're irreconcilable. The basis for reconciliation has been established to our great embarrassment.

Let me pray. our God, we do understand how irreconcilable we are in our vanity, in our self-centeredness, in our estrangement, in our hostility of mind with one another and with you. And the fact that you have been reconciled to us through Jesus Christ is a staggering reality. that we find it difficult to face. By your grace and in your mercy and by the inward working of your Holy Spirit, enable us to, we ask, in the name of the one through whom this reconciliation has become effective, even Jesus Christ.

[ 31 : 32 ] Amen. of Jesus Christ, all of Principle