Being Interpreted by Love

Susan F. Parsons

A rather scary road sign came into view the other day on a short journey from home. I have become used recently to riding on trains so perhaps this sign has been around for a while, and I'm only lately coming to see it. But it showed a drawing of a motorcyclist on a bike leaning precariously to one side as it overtakes another vehicle in front. The road ahead is none too straight in the drawing, and the speed lines splayed out around the bike suggest a cyclist who is going too fast for her own good, conveying thereby a general sense of the danger that lies in store for this kind of reckless driving. If that weren't enough, the words accompanying the drawing are even more ominous – for they pose what is a kind of rhetorical question – 'To die for . . . ?' they ask. Presumably any cyclist who sees such a sign is to consider herself forewarned, take a quick reckoning of the value of her life and the mere few seconds that such dangerous behaviour might or might not save on her trip, weigh up in a brief moment all that she loves and cares for that could be lost in just such an instant, and – ease up on the petrol.

Of course these signs that warn, and that cause me to consider some threat ahead in their warning, are now a commonplace in our culture, although exactly what actions they are meant to encourage is not always so clear. What I am to do in response is something I have to work out in an interpretation of what is before me. We've got so used to them on the sides of cigarette packets that the health warning alone can now be used to encourage you to buy them, as if the courting of this very danger could be, just for you, precisely the thrill of the smoke. Here the action I am encouraged to undertake according to the advertising is exactly the opposite of what the warning intends, and we play in this difference. It used to amuse me to see signs that indicate a shower of rocks descending from a high place onto the road ahead, as if one might be able to do anything at all about this, as one might just manage to swerve should a deer leap out of the woods or a duck with her ducklings decide urgently, as they do, that the road must be crossed just in front of your vehicle.

And in some signs, there is such delightful ambiguity. While the motorists who pass the sign painted in the road which says 'SLOW' as they drive up the hill into the University of Nottingham near my home, may read it as an imperative to slow down, when I pass this

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sign on a bicycle struggling to draw breath, it is to me quite plainly a statement of fact, muttering each time to myself, 'Too right it's slow'. These signs that prepare us for what is to come are meant to be helpful in our present decisions, meant to guide our expectations of the future, yet what sophisticated interpreters of these we have become, as we figure out what is being asked of us here, work out how we will respond in order to move along our way. Signs are already the outcome of an interpretation of the world, and so they draw me into this interpretative work for myself.

But it was the question about death that struck me in this sign, that suddenly posed to me the question of how a life is accounted for, that threw me in its warning into an entire cultural anxiety about what it is to die, and what it is to die *for* anything, and about how such a question might ever be decided in the midst of a world so intent upon producing the ultimate for itself. For isn't this the culture in which 'To die for . . . ' has become an advertising slogan meant to conjure up some amazingly wonderful experience that will follow the purchase of this or that thing, and yet that at once makes of death something tamed, something that only figures in my calculation of whether this or that thing is really worth the purchase price. I don't know – perhaps I don't go to the right shops. I keep looking. So it was the apparent ease with which death could be called upon here to subject me to its concern, to be at once a most startling moment of uncertainty before my own existence, making me to know that I almost might not be, and the offer of a security if I take the right steps, living constantly on the alert to its ever-present possibility. Am I foolish to wonder whether life is to be this insistent expectation of death, whose reality is brought nearer to me by the very preventative measures it demands, and whether the means of controlling it have not actually themselves overtaken me?

To ask such questions may not be popular with those who already know clearly what is death and what is life, for whom these are quite straightforward and obvious phenomena, so I will frankly have to admit that I find these things quite and fundamentally mysterious and not at all easy to grasp. For these are things that require our thinking, rather than our taking for granted, and they call for the most penetrating reflection on what faith gives us to know. And what are the signs of life and of death in a person, in a culture, are just as perplexing. They ask of us an interpretation and make us work out what they mean, what they stand for, where they come from and what they point to, and this surely is a most difficult and utterly self-involving matter. But when it is the case that we are directed to proclaim a gospel of life in the midst of a culture of death, that this is to be a central feature of that good news with which the world is to be evangelised and turned over to God, then I have to say that what we understand death to be and what we take life to be – that is to say,

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what is life for us – is the absolutely crucial matter of our faith, with which our witness to the life of a resurrected Lord becomes possible for us.

What else is being asked of us when we come to consider the nature of reconciliation? For is not the most immense landscape in which reconciliation occurs that which stretches between humanity and God, so that everything we might discuss under this heading is ultimately to be oriented to the understanding of how it is with God and humanity, and of what we are given to anticipate of the future, and of how it is that my life, your life, and our lives together are being interpreted by love and so made into a sign of that hope in which we live. These are the events into which speaking of reconciliation draws us – asking that we work out what is going on here in the conversation of humanity and God, asking that we seek to understand what it is out of which the world is living and towards which it is so busy directing itself to the things it calls life, and asking that we think how we are to be as ones called to serve a gospel of reconciliation. Nothing less than these huge things are we brought before when we ponder reconciliation. For we believe that it is precisely in this work of reconciliation that God accomplishes our salvation, that the entire mission of the Son to a broken and estranged world and the entire sending of the Spirit for our consolation and our strength, our joy and our energy – this whole *missio dei* is utterly for the bringing together of all humanity with God. Can this be other than the central turning point of faith?

And this is accomplished beginning in the tiniest place of my own heart, as I am brought to be close to God and am shaped by God's love into one who may, in turn, bear it and give birth to it in my own life. Is the parable of the Prodigal Son ever exhausted of its capacity to open us to the sheer joy of the Father, running most undignified across a field with his robes around his knees in his hurry to greet the one who simply wants to be there? Every confession is a confession of the amazing grace of this welcome until our faces are made to shine in its glow. Can we really tire of knowing this and of hearing this proclaimed to us over and over again? The bringing together of humanity with God begins in this smallest and most unworthy place, and if it can accomplish its miracle here, cannot any wonders lie open to its hands?

And this is accomplished as I am taken more deeply into the world to know its suffering, as my own heart is broken open to its terrible violence, to the desperate measures it takes to overcome its own ills, to the longing with which it reaches out for healing and for wholeness, to its cries for justice and for peace, and so as I am left to work out how it is that love may be known here. Reconciliation asks of me, of you, of the Church as sign of the already accomplishment of God's love, that we make of ourselves the bridge by which this love may

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cross over into an anguished humanity and take up its dwelling there. A friend of mine has shown me just what a very complex operation it is to build a bridge out of a pile of materials left on the ground, and if the recent experience of watching a group of children trying to cooperate in this exercise is anything to go by, then this alone is going to be no easy task for even a small group of people. What are the best materials for the bridge? What shape should it be? Where should its footings be placed? How far must it reach? How will it be held up? Will it bear the traffic of love? These are things we are called upon to consider, to try to figure out, as the Church is turned into this bridge by which love is to keep on coming into the world. The accomplishment of reconciliation happens here as we allow ourselves to become its pathway.

And this is accomplished in prayer, for I am asked always and at all times to pray, to be at prayer as we say that one is at work, and in prayer to be articulating what precisely is the thing that calls out for love, and to be holding up to God's mercy the places that hurt, and to be listening, straining heart and mind for what I am given to know about the way that love may be manifest here. Prayer is hard and difficult work and so it is through the Spirit's own sighing within us that we are able to pray. Yet prayer is that source, that deepest and clearest pool from which we draw our understanding of who we are in God's sight and our vision of what is to become of us in His love. Prayer is the pool in which we see ourselves reflected in God's tenderness, given back to ourselves as ones who have been made in a holy and jealous love. So it is in prayer that we already anticipate who we are, even though the evidence around us is so appallingly opposite to this, and even though it stretches our imaginations to the breaking point to believe that such love might ever really be so. So too it is in prayer that the peoples of the world come together, as they did in so many places on September 11th this year, to pray for reconciliation and for peace, each in their own tongue and with the prayers of their own faith and with the cries of their own people echoing in their words. The bringing together of humanity with God which is our reconciliation is accomplished in prayer as we are gathered up into our future.

In these ways, reconciliation is enacted in our midst. It is a performance of love that takes place between God and myself as we declare ourselves to one another, and between myself and others as we struggle with all the messy business that keeps us from honouring each other, and it happens in the light of the future. It is done because of what is to come, so it greets us from out of the future, allowing us to enter, in a moment somewhat at odds with ordinary time-keeping and without our having any kind of handle on it, what we are given in love to anticipate. So that to live in that moment, and to celebrate and give thanks for its appearance in our midst in the Eucharist, is to

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live entirely from what is given us in Christ, so that we may even learn to say with St Paul, 'For me, life is Christ.'[1]

And what is done in reconciliation is that I take into my own heart and mind the truth of love, that I let my own life, as wayward a course as it may have run, be interpreted by this love, which is the risk that I take as I turn around in my journey and head for home, and so come to understand myself, to have confidence in myself, as one belonging together with God. And what is done here is also and at once that I know myself to be only one human being among many, that I know the truth of love to be what each of us is known by, and so I can only be led to know my neighbour too as one whom God desires to touch, and whom God may reach through me, through my manner and my speaking. St Thomas writes that the aspect under which my neighbour is loved is God, so that what I ought to love in my neighbour is that he may be in God, and thereby I love him also into his future, into what is to become of him.[2] So it is in this way that the performing of reconciliation calls upon us to read one another's lives, helping each other to understand who we are to be, and giving one another grounds for hope that our belonging as one in the divine life is our common destiny.

What is said here about reconciliation is being said in order to find a way of speaking about this performance of love that may be received today as the good news of the gospel. For from the earliest days of his pontificate, the Holy Father has been urging upon us an acceptance of our place in the *missio dei*, and so of our engagement, at every level, with the world as it is informed by contemporary culture, and so of our being – wherever we find ourselves and in whatever walk of life – evangelists who proclaim God's goodness. The Apostolic Exhortation on the sacrament of reconciliation arising out of the 6th general assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1983 is exactly set into this context of evangelisation, reminding us that this sacrament is itself a witness, a sign pointing beyond itself to what lies ahead, a sign bearing an interpretation of the world under the aspect of love, and so bringing those who would understand themselves accordingly into its interpretation of what life is. And if bridge-building proves to be a somewhat contentious and too complicated project – (it is perhaps at this point that I should tell you the children completely abandoned this project, in the face of too many arguments fit for a Sunday afternoon and the promise of delicious puddings!) – then working out what it is to be this sign of love will probably be no less so.

For this is the point at which the noise of the world in the voice of its culture comes most urgently to our attention, clamouring to know

[1] Philippians 1^{21}

[2] *Summa Theologiae II.II*, Q25. Art.1.

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love even as it makes more dark and painful the way to its heart. Each of us knows that this world is already being lifted up as we ask to be reconciled to God, for we as individuals are not separable from it, and so the matter that we bring to this sacrament is a worlded heart, that bears the marks of the culture into which it has been thrown, and the scars of its own struggle within the terms that have been laid out for it. Teresa of Avila says just this, for the interior castle is never only an inside. And each of us knows that the world to which we go out is the same place, not suddenly made over into something different, but transformed in my bringing of it to be interpreted by love, and so renewed as I learn how to be generous, as God is, in my dealings with it. I say these things because reconciliation isn't, I think, some project that needs to be set up in the world out there somewhere else, other than here, or something that God is going to do to the world through my manipulation of it. Rather am I thoroughly implicated in what this world is, as without my choosing, I bear the guilt of its strife and its distractions and its waywardness towards truth, and as before I know it, I have assumed its ways of understanding as my own. So I come to the throne of the Lord's mercy with the world already on my heart, asking that my life may become a site of reconciliation, a place at which God and humanity are brought together in all that I do.

As I consider what it is that reconciliation requires of me, as I seek to cooperate with what God is doing here, so I become more aware of the clutter that accompanies me, not only in the burdens of my heart that can so easily get in the way of my attending properly to another, but in the assumptions I make about what *should* be happening here, about what I think *ought* to be going on. If I speak of the intrusion of the moral into our thinking of reconciliation, I will perhaps need to clarify this. For I do think that there is a cooperation with God into which we are called most actively and prayerfully with all that we are, and that this cooperation does and will have manifest outcomes that make a difference to human beings in the many varied situations of their lives. Nevertheless, the moral has a way of making itself felt even in this performance of love and so of introducing its own demands which reconciliation must then be made to serve. And I do this myself every time I consider what it is that reconciliation requires in order that what is moral can be fulfilled, and that is quite frankly the wrong way round.

I want to think about this issue carefully, and I do so for two reasons. Not only am I wary because this is a place in which the cultural inheritance of the west bears down upon my mind with the heavy weight of so much that is now taken for granted, that in order to think how God may be known in this world requires of me a difficult testing of each assumed truth in the light of God's, and so is a demanding intellectual work. But also I do so because it is precisely

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in the midst of this culture that love is to be manifest, so that if I may not show the way through these assumptions, and open up a way of saying how we are so loved and of doing the things that are of love, then to what am I witnessing but this same cultural inheritance, which is not at all what I am to be pointing to.

Indeed the moral intrudes itself into so many dimensions of our contemporary culture that we may miss what God is trying to do with us, and as and when we let go of this, we surely miss the heart of what reconciliation itself is about. And I want to suggest to you that if we miss what is happening in this work and overlook the strange and mysterious event of God's coming into which it beckons our lives, then the world is left within exactly its own all-too-predictable expectations, and I am returned as one who is still subject to these purposes that are already finished even as I take hold of them. For one of the curious and disturbing attractions of the moral in contemporary culture is that it seems to provide aims and objectives that are more readily graspable, and results more instantly tangible, so that the future becomes entirely secured against eventualities of any kind, and I myself become a thing of the past bound to its ways of life.

Each year at this time, I wonder how ever will the sheer oddity of advent be proclaimed, that running of God to greet us and to make His home with us, when the expectations of culture for the Christmas season, which now means only another time of year for shopping, are already on display everywhere I look. And as I look at them, and as I draw near to touch them, do they not already have the taste and the feel of the day after Christmas? Are they not already made up as so many dead objects bearing the world's desires, and so has not the time of their celebration already become a past event, over and done with, tired and predictable, that I cannot now enter into at all, except as one subjected to their power. Is it an accident that this so-called joyous season is littered with abused bodies and broken spirits? It is precisely the freshness of meeting with God which is there to be known in reconciliation, that breaks through the world's expectations with hope of what is to come. And it is precisely the word of new life received when I know myself to be one forgiven, that gives me over to freedom and puts me before my genuine future. How urgently must I speak within the Church that it will hold its course to the way of this truth, so that we may give account of this hope which is in our midst.[3]

We miss what is to be done here when we allow the moral to hold sway, as we lose touch with what it is that God's peace-making does. If I have emphasised the character of reconciliation as it is understood by faith, it is because this is where I know it to belong, as the

[3] I Peter 3^{15}

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overflow of charity from the divine life reaching out to enfold us that faith is given to know, and as the taking up of the invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good that each person of faith wants to do, and as the giving into the mind and heart of faith a peace that entirely passes our understanding that we can only receive from God with thanks. But in this world of ours, such connections risk being severed, so that reconciliation is allowed to float free from its moorings, as some kind of quirky religious practice leftover from a bygone age that you don't really want to know about, and that certainly the world will have no time for. And the very beliefs that would have held this work to its end of bringing us together with the divine, have now been declared redundant by a world that claims to be able to look after itself, its pockets stuffed with handbooks of moral wisdom which it says it can fulfill so much better than the Church ever did or will do, and with the remnants of a language it now proposes to locate solely within the discourse of justice.

So it is with a curious sense of the irony of history that within this contemporary secular discourse a set of theological assumptions from an earlier time of the Church's life is reappearing. Jack Mahoney notes three of these assumptions at work in his discussion of the role that early confessional practices played in the making of moral theology. The first of these is a preoccupation with sin, the outgrowth of a pessimistic anthropology that became absorbed 'almost exclusively', he writes, 'with the darker and insubordinate side of human existence'. A moral theology shaped by such 'a commitment to spiritual pathology' resulted in its near total absorption with a cataloguing of the most minute details of sins and with 'diligent enquiry' into their circumstances and their appropriate punishments. Secondly, he notes, is the 'concentration on the individual', which not only left little room for consideration of the wider context of social or institutional sin, but also rendered the individual vulnerable to excessive interest in the things of private life and most particularly of sexual behaviour. Thirdly, he claims, there is in this confessional model an obsession with law, setting human life into a great cosmic court room, and so with the passing of a judgment upon an individual life as an account of it is presented before the court, all of which is sustained by theological assumptions concerning 'divine justice, anger, and retribution'.[4]

To follow the course of these assumptions as they develop more fully in the medieval period, and as they furnish much of the material with which modern humanism has been forged, by that time in the midst of a full-scale rejection of the metaphysical framework within which they had made sense, would require a much more full and

[4] John Mahoney, SJ, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 27–36.

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detailed study than is possible here. What can begin to be seen however, even in this brief sketch, is that a set of assumptions concerning the relation of humanity and God have become also features of thinking within the contemporary world, now removed from their theological context. So that we find ourselves in the midst of them and ensnared by them as each of us comes to meet with the Lord in confession, and as we are thrown back into a contentious world, that in many cases requires us to keep silence about the things of God, and as we anticipate the future that is to come in our prayer. Yet this is the world in which we are to be evangelists, in which our understanding of what reconciliation is, as a founding event of our faith, and our own willingness to locate ourselves within its work, will constitute its on-going performance, becoming the sign to our world of what has happened in Christ.

Current interest in the details of sin needs little comment from me, for you know as well as I just how much of everyday conversation is consumed by this prurient scrutiny of the lives of others, no matter how remote from us they are, and how this appears also and even in the Church as a fascination with the wrong-doings of humanity that must be put right by the Church's own clear-cut moral statements and actions. What is new to the phenomenon as we know it is that such enquiries are now conducted not through the medium of Christ and of his work of reconciliation, but rather through the medium of television, and this means through the medium of the visual, by which the confessional has now become entirely opened up to public view and approbation. By this means, the second assumption of concentration on the individual, is only exacerbated. For each of us in the privacy of our own rooms before a TV or surfing the web is made to be a witness to events we have not been directly involved in, and we are made to be judges who may decide the fate of these events from a distance. At best, our culture provides for us, or perhaps we are supposed to pick these up from out of the Church's own teachings, a set of values by which these decisions might be made and according to which their outcome can be measured. Is this anything but the remains of the death of God, whose role is now to be played out by individuals acting each one as witness and judge of the world's events, the social being only constituted by collections of like-minded individuals who cluster together under banners, displaying the signs of the values they share? Is this no longer a description of the great freedom declared by modernity but rather of our subjection entirely to its ways?

And the obsession with law? Well only the most cursory glance at the agenda of the numerous commissions that have sprung up around the world since the second world war reveals how each of them is set up around a court. So that what happens within this court, as the facts are brought before it, and the crimes against humanity are listed

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and scrutinised, is a work of disclosure, opening up to view before the eyes of the world, and now the public demands that all of this be seen or available to read, what has happened in this situation or that nation. The literature of these commissions and tribunals is informed by a belief that such disclosures are the necessary first step in the reconciliation process, and that until all the facts are known and the thing has become entirely transparent to us, we cannot begin to make progress in the adjudication of just punishment and the resolution of dispute. Once made, the disclosures then become the material to which the list of the world's commonly agreed human rights can be applied. This in turn will provide the basis for decisions concerning reparations and any preventative measures that should be taken in order to restore a less turbulent co-existence of aggrieved parties. So overriding is this concern for law in our time that we can hardly see around it. So taken for granted is it as the way things *must* happen, that the very questions of St Paul in his own wrestling with the prevalence of law, and further back the startling insight of the Hebrew prophets that the law would not yield our peace with God nor with one another – these questions and these struggles remain closed to us.

It is characteristic of the postmodern time in which we live, that the conduct of all of these ways of reconciliation is shaped by not a little cynicism, already aware that there is an elaborate cultural game being played out here which we are individually powerless to halt and which only the powerful can and do manipulate to their advantage. And so I suggest the intrusion of the moral into the work of reconciliation no longer even speaks to us of a real possibility for justice to be done, for restoration of friendship to be accomplished, or for any kind of peace to be attained, and so we expect only the cessation of hostilities, the making safe of the world so that it can go about its business as usual.

Each of us, as one who asks to live in Christ, is caught up in some way in this exercise that plays out the loss of faith in the hollowed-out heart of the world. Each of us wonders how we will speak of the justice of God, which is to be flowing down the mountainsides to wash the earth of its guilt. Each of us wonders how we may articulate this without assuming the very voice of power, that expects to overcome everything that is here with something higher, more grand and all-encompassing, and so is heard by an already wearied world as yet another empty bid for control of its affairs. Each of us as a person of faith in the midst of this grieving world also wonders whether justice is all there is to say here, and so is called upon to consider what love is, and to speak of the coming of this love and of how the world, of how my life, is to be interpreted by God's love, and to do so in the words of love and so in the performing of love in and by what is said.

This paper, and what I hope you have been hearing as I read it, is informed by the possibility that there is a way of saying these things,

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and in particular, by a deepening awareness that what is needed today in speaking of reconciliation is that we be given time. Reconciliation is a matter of time, and of time as the unfolding of love in human life and so within the world of human affairs. To be given time is to be presented with the future as what I am to become in God, and to be called upon freely to step out into what is coming towards me here, and to be assured that what awaits me is only and entirely of God's tenderness and so there is nothing to fear in its coming. This giving of time is what renders me attentive to what is happening in my life, and asks of me where I have been all this time, and where I think I am going, and what I understand myself to be doing as I go about my business. These are never easy questions in the life of a soul, nor are they less troublesome when we ask them together with others who wonder along with us what is happening in the world, and where has it come from to get into this state, and wherever does it think it is going. To be given time is to be able to enter into the world in a timely way, which is to say in hope, hope that is made real for us as we hear the words of absolution in the sacrament of reconciliation and as we receive into our souls and bodies the heavenly feast of the Eucharist. Thus interpreted by love within the life of the Church, each of us becomes a sign of reconciliation, one through whom God makes His appeal to every one we meet, 'Be reconciled to God', and in this way find what is life.

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