

Ambassadors for Christ's Sake: St. Paul's Vision of Reconciliation

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Introduction

It is an honor and a pleasure to be asked to address the theme of Saint Paul's vision of reconciliation at this event, celebrating the Jubilee Year of Saint Paul, proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the National Pastoral Life Center. The theme of reconciliation has certainly been one consonant with the purposes of the Center, especially in its staffing of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative through the past decade. I might add that a third event gives an additional reason to explore the theme of reconciliation; namely, 2009 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Reconciliation, wherein renewed efforts are to be made to bring healing and reconciliation to the many war-torn corners of our world. All in all, these three events give ample cause of celebration, for a deeper reflection on the message of reconciliation in Saint Paul's writing and ministry, and its continued relevance for our own day.

In this address I will focus on Saint Paul's vision of reconciliation. As the exegete Ralph Martin noted nearly three decades ago, "reconciliation" in some ways sums up the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for St. Paul, especially as the Gospel message to the Gentiles.¹ What I want to explore here is some of the distinctive characteristics of

¹ Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981).

Paul's understanding of reconciliation, and how they shape the Christian understanding of reconciliation today. With that as a backdrop, I want to turn to the meaning of that message for our understandings of peacebuilding in this International Year of Reconciliation, and what the message of reconciliation can continue to mean for the work of the National Pastoral Life Center in the years ahead.

Paul's Vision of Reconciliation

While one finds great stories of reconciliation throughout the Bible—one thinks of Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, or the Prodigal Son—the use of the explicit vocabulary of reconciliation is actually very limited. Words denoting reconciliation do not occur at all in the Hebrew Scriptures, and only fourteen times in the New Testament. Of these occurrences, all but two are in the writings of Paul. For Paul, then, what reconciliation connotes must have had special significance to him. And so we are right to look to Paul for a highly distinctive understanding of reconciliation.

The word “reconciliation” (Greek *katallegein*) did not have any specifically religious significance in Paul's time. It had two specific secular meanings: to make peace after a time of war, and to bring an estranged couple back together in their marriage. Yet with Paul, we see this term broadened and deepened to take on individual, social, and even cosmic dimensions.

A number of exegetes have suggested that Paul's own experience of the risen Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-9) was key to his understanding of reconciliation. The meaning of that story of “conversion” (as it is usually designated) is much debated as to its exact meaning for Paul. To be sure, the language of “old” and “new” pervades Paul's account of the experience that turned him to Christ, and figures strongly in his

explanations of reconciliation. Yet conversion in this instance does not mean turning away from the Judaism that had defined his entire life up to that point. Exegetes believe that Paul would have continued to consider himself a Jew. There was a turn, however, in his treatment of the followers of Jesus. The story of this turn as recounted in Acts 9 has Paul “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” (Acts 9:1) When he encounters the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, he finds himself forgiven for all he had done against those disciples and commissioned into the Risen Lord’s service. He enters a community of Jewish Christians, accepts the teaching about Jesus that had developed in the years between the Resurrection and the current time, and begins his life as a Jewish Christian. The early communities he visits are those of Jewish Christians. It is only pondering the meaning of his own mission, given him directly by the Risen Lord, that he comes to see himself called to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. In doing so, a problematic only then opens up for him, as to what the meaning of this Gospel for the Gentiles must mean in light of the election of Israel and, conversely, what it means for Israel.

In Paul’s own subsequent ministry, he melds together the influences of four different contextual strands as he presents the Gospel. He passes on to his hearers what had been passed on to him (cf. 1 Cor 15:2); that is, he accepts the teaching that has been forming in the communities of the followers of Jesus. This is evident in the fragments of formulae and hymns we find throughout his writing and the larger Pauline corpus. Secondly, he respects the Jewish heritage out of which this message has arisen. He is at pains time and time again to relate the meaning of the message of Jesus to the history of Israel. The long reflection of this in Romans 9-11 is perhaps the most striking evidence of this, as is the

reflection on Law and Gospel in Galatians. Third, he tries to contextualize his message to the Hellenism of so many of his hearers, as his famous speech in the Aeropagus in Acts 17 so graphically indicates. He wants to meet the Gentiles, as it were, on their own ground. And finally, he is attuned to the pervasive forms of Gnosticism in the environment, especially with Gnosticism's preoccupation with the astral powers that control and constrain human life, and the quest for means of liberation from these powers through true knowledge and wisdom.

I mention all of these since they together present the context for his message of reconciliation. But before going into how the message of reconciliation addresses people in each of those contexts, we need to return to the moment portrayed on the Damascus Road itself, where Paul experiences something that will be central to his own proclamation that God is reconciling the world.

We cannot of course get inside the mind of Paul at that moment. The account in Acts presented this as a shattering moment for Paul, so much so that he loses his external sight for some time subsequent to the experience. What that assertion might be pointing to is that Paul could no longer guide himself by his own lights, so to speak. He became utterly dependent on the followers of Jesus to lead him into a new way of seeing.

And what was that new way of seeing? Paul's reflections on the meaning of reconciliation and his own subsequent description of this shattering experience indicates that, at its core, it was an experience of God's graciousness and forgiveness of him through the risen Christ. It echoes in the words of one of his great expositions of the experience of reconciliation, in Romans 5: 8: for while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. In this life-changing event, Paul does not hear charges brought against him, other

than the question of why he has been persecuting Jesus in persecuting his followers. Rather than judgment, he feels an overwhelming graciousness and forgiveness. What he experiences in this event is not a trial or forensic action, but a person: the risen Jesus. So it is not about rules and practices, but an encounter with a living person. Reconciliation in Paul's experience then, addresses a situation not involving citing what rules have been broken or exactly what has to be done to make things right, but rather the very conditions under which all this is even approached has been changed. This is reflected in another of the classic passages in the Pauline writings about reconciliation, namely, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; "that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:19). A whole new way of reckoning is being introduced. As a result, the law court or the negotiation room is no longer the model for reconciliation; it is, rather, a social space where things are made utterly new.

This utter newness is caught especially in the just mentioned text from 2 Corinthians:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! 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. (2 Cor 5:17-20)

Reconciliation here is clearly God's work. It is not something we have merited or achieved. It is something graciously bestowed on us. And even more: this gracious reconciliation is now a ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted by God to us. This is the message that Paul is preaching to his hearers, both Jews and Gentiles alike.

It is worthwhile to dwell a moment on what Paul thought this message meant to the Jews and to the Gentiles. The place where Paul struggles to relate this to the Jews most

clearly is in the letter to the Romans. In Romans 5:1-11, he tries to relate this message of God's gratuitous act of reconciliation to the themes of justification and atonement, themes familiar to those of Jewish faith as ways of God's interacting with humanity. Here the atoning death of Christ is the means of our reconciliation to God. While how to understand the atonement today is a much contested question among theologians, because it conjures images of God quelling his wrath by the tortured death of Jesus on the cross—even demanding that only such a can appease his anger against sinners—seen through the lens of Paul's understanding of reconciliation, it looks differently. It is Christ's free act of taking to himself all that separates us from God and taking that to the cross that brings about reconciliation. The cross and death on the cross makes us take the damage of sin seriously; the cross too reminds us that the alienation cannot be overcome by simple, ordinary or linear means. Rather, it takes an action that changes the very conditions under which we talk about and approach these things. The power of reconciliation is such that it becomes co-extensive with the great act of atonement in the liturgical cycle of Jewish worship.² By making this equation, Paul seeks to link the action of Christ—and especially the place of the cross within that—to God's saving actions for Israel.

For the Gentiles, Paul paints on a broader, more cosmic canvas. Much of the Hellenistic world at that time lived with a certain resignation or even pessimism regarding their lot in the world. Their cosmology was one of the spirit world and the earthly reality both being controlled by a welter of spiritual beings or destiny that demanded tribute and appeasement on a constant basis, lest more misfortune might be unleashed on an already weary world. These are the "powers and principalities, the

² It is notable that in the King James Version of the Bible, the word "reconciliation" is sometimes translated as "atonement." In some languages, the same word is used for both reconciliation and atonement (i.e., the North Germanic languages).

thrones and dominations” referred to in the Pauline writings. They are the “aeons” referred to in a non-Pauline writing, the Letter to the Hebrews, which may have been destined for a community close to that of the Colossians. Paul acknowledges these powers as real, but says that they are overcome by Christ, the visible image of the invisible God who is greater than all of these. In the hymn that opens the Letter to the Colossians, this cosmic claim for reconciliation is made, especially in the closing verses (1:19-20): “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” The image in the Letter to the Hebrews, of Christ as the ultimate high priest who brings the sacrifice through the encircling aeons into the very presence of God in the heavenly temple, echoes this same sentiment.

The idea that God is already reconciling the world, and that these brooding deities no longer have ultimate power, makes Christ the point of orientation as well as reconciliation for the world. This profound re-orientation can be found by entering Christ’s circle in the Church. Thus, God has extended the offer of reconciliation even to the Gentiles regardless of their association with Jews or Jewish history. It is an offer that once again, does not just offer a new formula for overcoming alienation, anxiety, and apathy within the already given framework, but changes the very conditions of the conversation itself.

Regarding Jews and Gentiles, there are the communities of followers of Jesus that are constituted both by Jews and Gentiles. For them, too, there is a message in the Gospel of reconciliation that Christ preaches. Paul draws attention to at least two such themes.

To the fractious Church at Corinth, the theme of their infighting and lack of unity on all sorts of matters was a preoccupation of Paul, in the two letters of his we have addressed to the Church there. Margaret Mitchell already some years ago pointed out how the rhetoric of reconciliation shapes Paul's entire address to the Corinthian community³: how for example his discourse on the Church as the Body of Christ and his paean to love in chapters twelve and thirteen are an attempt to help the Corinthians see things differently. For when the very grounds and conditions of the conversation (or controversy) are changed, we must come to see things differently. Disputes and divisions can often not be resolved in the terms presented by the two contesting sides; often a new framework and a new topography of the conflict needs to be presented in order to bring about any kind of resolution.

To the Church in Ephesus, in chapter two of the eponymous Letter, the Deutero-Pauline author—much in the spirit of Paul—is suggesting to the Gentile readers that they need to show more graciousness to the Jews, who were the first heirs of the Covenant. The passage is one of the other great sources of our understanding of the Pauline Gospel of Reconciliation:

Remember that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in the flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access to one Spirit to the Father.

³ Margaret Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in who you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph 2:12-21)

It has been suggested that this passage may have been composed some time shortly after the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem. The Jews were now without their spiritual and symbolic center, and Gentile Christians in Ephesus were gloating over the plight of the erstwhile Chosen People of God. The author here clearly wants to forestall such divisive action by reminding Gentile Christians that they were once even further away from God, and only through the reconciling work of Christ were they now within God's household, and indeed were there with their Jewish Christian counterparts. The graciousness that God had shown them they must now extended to their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters who were suffering the trauma of the loss of the Temple. To be reconciled, then, is a call to live in the same graciousness to others as has been shown to them.

A final remark too about Paul (and the Pauline community) as they direct the message of reconciliation to fellow Christians. Exegetes note that the three passages that have been cited here—from Second Corinthians, from Colossians, and from Ephesians—are all based on fragments of hymns (or, in the case of Colossians, on perhaps an entire hymn) that were likely in circulation among the early Christian communities before Paul joined the followers of Jesus. If this is the case, this would indicate that while Paul's own experience of reconciliation to God in Christ had its own specific features, he drew upon the already existent language of reconciliation that was circulating in the communities that formed around the experience of Jesus. That reinforces what was said earlier about

Paul's being completely formed in the *kerygma* of the early Church, even as he used it to interpret his own experience and reshape the experience of the communities with which he came into contact. This would counteract the claim frequently made in the nineteenth century that Paul introduced an alien Gospel into the early Christian movement. Most exegetes today, I believe, would say that Paul remained true to his Jewish roots.

To summarize, then: Paul's Gospel of reconciliation is based on an experience of utter graciousness and gratuity coming from God. It is not something achieved by human beings, nor merited by their actions. Thus it cannot be measured completely in human terms. Consequently it is not to be understood as an adjustment of existing systems and relationships; it is, rather, a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). It affects all levels of relationships and systems: personal, communal, and cosmic. This reconciliation is effected through the action of Christ, especially through his action on the cross. The cross stands as a sign of contradiction—foolishness to the Greeks, a stumbling block to the Jews: Christ the wisdom of God and the power of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:23-24).

Yet at the same time this sovereign work of God does not stand at a distance from earthly realities, but is deeply enmeshed with them. It deals with the real experience of alienation and anxiety. It addresses the divisions and conflicts within communities. It addresses the very way we look at the world, in both its visible and invisible dimensions. What the vision of reconciliation does, however, is de-center us, that is, it moves us away from taking ourselves as the center point of orientation and arbitration and places that center squarely with God. In reconciliation we see God truly as active in the world.

This is carried further by Paul's astonishing claim in Second Corinthians that this ministry of reconciliation has now been entrusted to us by God. We are ambassadors of

Christ, speaking and acting on behalf of Christ to witness to the saving power of God. We do this in discerning the action of God in a broken, conflicted, and deeply troubled world. When we are able to see the glimmerings of hope in the midst a widespread gloom, when we can celebrate the small victories of justice being done or a measure of peace being achieved in situations that are without hope and without promise, we witness to what God is doing in the world. When with God's help we are able to effect some measure of change that improves people's lives, bring them comfort in their suffering, or sustain their own struggle to hope and to move forward, we are witnessing to God's work. And when we live together, to the best of our ability, as a reconciled people, we mirror in faith what God is bringing about in reality. Paul's Gospel of Reconciliation is indeed Good News for a broken world that is losing hope.

Paul's Message of Reconciliation and Contemporary Peacebuilding

I wish to turn now to the second half of this presentation, where I want to look at what Paul's message of reconciliation means in two areas of our contemporary world, namely, the world of international peacebuilding, and the more immediate world of the Roman Catholic Church in this country, something that the National Pastoral Life Center had addressed tirelessly over the past twenty-five years.

Let me begin with the place of reconciliation within international peacebuilding today. On the one hand, it is important to realize that the concept of reconciliation itself has become increasingly attenuated as it comes to be used more and more. Sometimes the meaning has downright perverted, when wrongdoers call upon victims to forget the past and work with them to create a better future. This amounts simply to wrongdoers not being held accountable for what they have done. This occurred after the so-called "dirty

war” in Argentina in 1983. Reconciliation in this sense precludes the pursuit of justice. “Reconciliation” was used by right-wing ideologues in the Church in Latin America in the mid-1980s to subvert the language and practice of liberation, and again stifle the cries of the poor. In political and military circles, “reconciliation” has come to mean no more than a cessation of armed conflict or anything that ends overt opposition, but does not address the underlying patterns of oppression and aggression that sustain conflict. “Reconciliation” is sometimes invoked in religious circles to mean that we should be all nice to one another and shy away from airing our differences.

All of this diminishes the powerful message of reconciliation as Paul understood it. Reconciliation is about real engagement with real problems, taking them and all who are involved in them seriously. Most of the best of efforts at international peacebuilding today understand that. And rather than dealing with the abuse of the term, I want to address here the honest efforts to attain greater reconciliation by focusing briefly on four things we are learning in this arena.

First of all, while much has been learned about negotiation and reaching peace agreements in the efforts of the last thirty-five years, something perhaps more important is coming increasingly to the fore. While techniques and strategies are important, there is something deeper that has to be at work for genuine reconciliation to take place. In secular peacebuilding circles, it is being called “moral imagination.”⁴ What moral imagination call us to is to be able to think differently about a situation, and to get us out of the ruts that contesting sides of a conflict often burrow into in the course of conflict. Where there is polarity, we need to learn to see paradox. When we think of what a

⁴ See here especially John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

peaceful future looks like, that vision must have room for our enemies as well as ourselves. We need to come to realize that peace is less a mechanical construction than a creative act. In religious (and specifically Christian circles), this means putting spirituality before strategy. We need to have a repertoire of strategies, to be sure. But without a broader horizon that understands that every situation of conflict is different, no matter how much it may resemble another one; that conflicts sustained over time absorb into themselves many other roots of conflict; that creating win-lose situations may cause a pause in a conflict, but only for a time—without seeking a broader horizon that is de-centered away from ourselves or the actors in the conflict, there is little hope of resolution and reconciliation.

The second thing we are learning is that the resolution of conflict is rarely linear. Much as we would like to see conflicts as problems to be solved, they tend to become so enmeshed in many other things that their resolution is rarely straightforward. The importance of ritual as a way of marking steps in a conflict (steps, not predictable stages), rituals that at key points give voice to the inexpressible and allow us to move back in time from the present, rituals that allow a level of participation by many parties, rituals that speak of the wounds carried in our bodies and not just in our minds—all of this is something that we are learning more and more about. The human accompaniment that goes with reconciliation must be such that it is willing to stay close by in the meandering, the wrong turns, the dead ends that mark the gradual and often messy process of human healing. There is a Jewish proverb that says: “It took God one day to get the Hebrews out of Egypt, but it took God forty years to get Egypt out of the Hebrews.” That is something of prescription for the work of reconciliation today.

Third, peace accords that are reached at the top levels of a society may stop the overt conflict, but the real reconstruction has to be done at the grassroots. Indeed, sometimes peace accords imposed from above can actually make things worse on the ground, because they do not comprehend all the dimensions of the conflict, and do not provide resources for rebuilding people's relationships and their lives. There is a top-down process that can create conditions for something different to happen than ongoing, debilitating conflict. But without a concomitant work from the ground-up, a fabric of lasting peace cannot be achieved.

Fourth, the strands of what make up true reconciliation—truth, justice, mercy, peace—cannot be pursued independently of one another (Cf. Psalm 85:10). This is the terrible lesson that is unfolding in the Sudan right now. While the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court against President al-Bashir of the Sudan would appear to be a triumph of justice, it is leading to the expulsion of all the aid agencies that are keeping the thousands of displaced persons in Darfur alive. What those same aid agencies had warned about is being realized: a “thin” or abstract understanding of justice may prove in the long run to be deeply destructive of an already desperate situation.

One of the interesting points about all four of these recent points of view about reconciliation is how deeply they all resonate with Paul's teaching on reconciliation. Reconciliation, when all is said and done, is not about technique or strategy but an encounter with a person, and with the mysterious resources of creativity that come with that. The road to reconciliation is something of a *mysterion* in that older sense of the word. Its trajectories are neither straightforward nor predictable; they twist and turn and double back as we do in human relationships. The language of ritual sometimes makes

more sense of its development than models of progress or progression. While Paul believed that reconciliation would eventually one day mean that all things come together in Christ, the time between now and then could well be marked by very non-linear patterns of movement. To understand how reconciliation comes about we must be able to understand more than the overarching or macro-movements; we need to understand what is happening in local communities, and understand the local histories embedded in concrete realities, with conflicts sometimes “nested” one within the other in such a way as to make any single one of them easy to resolve. Finally we must not be dazzled by the abstract concepts that govern the discourse of reconciliation—such as truth-telling, the pursuit of justice—as though these can be pursued independently of one another; we must come to understand how they each condition the other, all the time.

Put another way, the road to reconciliation is a messy one, something we cannot completely control from our own resources. This constant reminder of the need to de-center ourselves and try to discern the movements of God in what we see and hear helps us keep to our proper roles as agents of God’s reconciliation, as ambassadors of Christ, empowered to speak and act on his behalf, but never being the Christ ourselves.

Reconciliation and the Work of the National Pastoral Life Center

Lastly, I wish to turn to the event that has brought us together especially for this celebration, the quarter century of work of the National Pastoral Life Center. Here I want to focus on what it has done for the Church in the United States. Paul’s own concern for the Church in Corinth, and how God’s work of reconciliation might be accomplished within that community for that community’s sake, provides a framework for thinking about the contribution of the NPLC through these last twenty-five years.

A Church that is a community of reconciliation is a community of memory and a community of hope. Reconciliation involves memory—the sustaining of memory, the transformation of toxic memories, and the healing of memories. The Church carries within it a memory of suffering—what Johann Baptist Metz has called the *memoria passionis*—not simply as a burden of suffering, but a memory of the suffering of Christ that in turn attunes the Church to the suffering of the present day. That acutely attuned memory is the source of the Church’s quest for justice, its defense of human rights. But a reconciled and reconciling community is also a community of hope: a community that can see in a critical fashion beyond the present and not lose sight of what its Lord has promised it—a time when “God will be all in all.” (I Cor 15:28) One sees the Church at its best in this in its support of immigrant rights, for example, where the suffering of those in migration is not forgotten, where migrants are offered a safe haven, where others can stand with them and stand up for them, and where efforts are made to secure them a better future. If one looks back over the many things that NPLC has tried to undertake for the sake of the Church in the past twenty-five years, we can recognize how it has sought to strengthen the memory and sustain the hope of a community struggling with divisions and conflicts, yet seeking to be something more.

The other area of the work of the NPLC I would like to hold up here has been its assuming leadership in the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. The CCGI touches upon some of the most neuralgic points for life within the Church today—the divisions that were named in the CCGI’s founding document, “Called to be Catholic” are still very much in evidence and have, in some instances, become even greater flashpoints. The efforts that have been undertaken, and those efforts that are still underway and seek ever

deeper commitment on the parts of those who participate in their programs, reflect much of the dynamics of reconciliation that were reviewed in the previous section on international peacebuilding. We have certainly learned more about the complexity of what the healing of divisions entails. We know more about what it means to make our places of dialogue truly safe and welcoming spaces for transformation. We are certainly more deeply aware of how non-linear processes of reconciliation can be. We are more conscious of the role of ritual and prayer alongside the practices of dialogue that make for successful engagement and encounter. And we have learned more about hope—about seeing the small victories, about how hope is something comes to us from God and not from ourselves.

Paul's teaching on reconciliation could even more deeply pattern our efforts at bringing a divided Church together. Like the fractious community at Corinth; like the beleaguered community in the Lycus Valley who were the probable addresses of the letter to the Colossians; like the community in Ephesus, pondering past trauma and present divisions, we can return to Paul's Gospel of reconciliation to find ourselves and our current situation in the contours of those ancient communities who struggled among themselves and with their surrounding environments that constrained and at time blocked them from realizing something better. With those communities, we look for reconciliation, for coming to be in Christ in such a way as to be a New Creation, of looking forward to the day when God will be all in all. Along the way, it will have been organizations such as the National Pastoral Life Center that have given us strength and helped us keep the hope alive in the day when, for us, all things will be brought together in Christ.