

I'm a fan of Shakespeare. It's hard to get a degree in English Literature without appreciating Shakespeare at least a little. Over the years, I've read and enjoyed more than a few of his plays. But when you read Shakespeare, one of the most fundamental things you must understand is the difference between tragedy and comedy.

Simply put, in a Shakespearean tragedy everybody dies. And in a Shakespearean comedy everybody lives. It seems pretty straightforward on the outside. But there's actually a rather profound reason for this contrast.

The reason everybody dies in a tragedy is because the characters chose to resolve their conflict through violence and death. The reason everybody lives in a comedy is because the characters chose to resolve their conflict through reconciliation and peace.

A tragedy is tragic, not just because everybody dies, but because of the violent, deceptive, malicious choices that led to their deaths. A comedy is happy, not just because everybody lives, but because of the wise, peaceful, loving choices that led to their reconciliation.

And that, in my opinion, is what makes Shakespeare worth reading. Because that contrast of choices – violence or peace – and that contrast of outcomes – death or reconciliation – is really a life lesson as well. It's a lesson for how we interact with our friends and neighbors. And it's a lesson for how we interact with God.

In fact, it's one of the main themes of the Bible. The Bible is very much about people given the choice between making their relationship with God a tragedy or making it a comedy. Making it a drama where everybody dies in violence. Or making it a drama where everybody lives in reconciliation.

And, as far as God is concerned, the answer always lies in reconciliation. As I mentioned in my children's message, that's Isaiah's message in our Old Testament lesson. *"I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me."*

God was angry. He could have killed us. All of us. Time and time again, he could have wiped the slate clean and started over. With Adam and the fall into sin. With Noah and the flood. With Moses on Mt Sinai. With Judah and the exile. He could have made humanity one giant tragedy where everybody died. But he chose to be reconciled with us.

The same is true in our Gospel lesson. It's a familiar story. Something straight out of Shakespeare, really. A young man goes to his father and demands for his portion of the inheritance. His father reluctantly agrees. The young man leaves and travels to a far off land. He squanders his money in parties and luxury. Surrounds himself with sinfulness and wicked friends.

He ends up hungry, homeless, and alone. And he realizes that the only way his life will be anything but an unmitigated tragedy is to be reconciled with his father. To beg for forgiveness. To ask for the barest room and board. And to be treated like a slave.

But his father isn't one to reconcile halfway. He sees his son, rushes to him in love, and invites him back into the family with a celebration. Tragedy becomes comedy and everyone lives happily ever after.

More than anything else, it is the will of God to be reconciled with humanity. And the purpose of Jesus Christ, here on earth and into eternity, is to make that reconciliation happen. To bring God and man together and say, "Let there be peace on earth to those on whom God's favor rests." It was the song of the angels on the hills of Bethlehem and it is the message of Christ to us until the end of time.

But reconciliation isn't easy. The longer that two people fight, the harder it is to bring peace. I'm sure there's more than a few people here who have family that they haven't spoken to in years. Why? Because reconciliation is hard. And it's especially hard when one of the people involved keeps trying to hurt the other person.

And yet, that's what happens with mankind. Every time we sin, we attack God's kingdom. Every time we sin, we declare ourselves enemies of God. How can reconciliation happen when there is so much violence between us?

Well, that's what St Paul lays out for us in our Epistle. He shows us step by step how God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ. And it all begins with a new point of view.

He writes: *"From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*

We are a new creation. By water and the Spirit, we are born again. And those born again eyes see the world differently. We don't just see the world with eyes of flesh. We see the world with eyes of the Spirit.

Eyes that see things like sin and righteousness and God working amongst his people. Eyes that see more than an ordinary man dying on a cross. But, instead, see the Son of God come down from heaven, made flesh, living among us. And demonstrating his love for us by sacrificing himself on the cross.

And so, for the first time, we see the world as God sees it. Not as a place of basically good people, as we so often like to convince ourselves. But as a place of wickedness and corruption. Where no one does good. And all should be ashamed.

We see the world through God's eyes and we see ourselves for what we are. Sinners. Without merit or hope. Sinners. Who cannot hope to change ourselves. For our sinfulness comes from within. From our very heart. And spreads to everything we do.

And yet, we also see the change that has been worked in us. That by baptism and faith in Christ, the old man who did those sinful things has passed away and a new man has come. And that all this is from God. Who has made us this new creation. Who has sent Christ into the world. And who, through his death and resurrection, does not count our trespasses against us.

That's step two of reconciliation: Sacrifice. Somebody has to give. Somebody has to stop fighting. Somebody has to turn the other cheek. Even if that means being whipped and spit upon and tortured and killed. Somebody has to take the first step. And in Christ, God took the first step toward us.

He took the first step. And the second. And the third. And every other step afterwards. He saw us from a long way off and ran out to find us. All this is from God. Not half of it. Not most of it. All of it. It is all a gift of God. It is all his sacrifice for us.

So that then we could become ambassadors. That's step three: Communication. You cannot have reconciliation without communication. A war will never end unless one side talks to the other. An argument will never end unless one person talks to the other. And the battle between God and man will never end unless mankind hears God speaking to us.

So that's where we fit in. We don't do the reconciling. We can't bring peace to this war on our own. But we can be ambassadors. We can bring a message of peace from God to... everyone. To our families. To our friends. To our neighbors.

We are ambassadors for Christ. God makes his appeal for peace through us. We open the lines of communication and we let the incredible message of God's Word do its work. So that, with eyes of faith, the whole world might see the sacrifice God made for us. And be reconciled to him.

So that this world, headed straight down the road of violence and death might turn from it's sinfulness. Might turn and find reconciliation with God. And so that we might stand with joy on that last day, look back on the drama of this present age, and know that what could have been the greatest of tragedies has instead become a divine comedy, where many will live in the end. Amen.