

Sunday Scribblings No.25 – 14th after Trinity

Lectionary readings¹ for today are;

Genesis 50:15-21. Psalm 103:1-13. Matthew 18:21-35. Romans 14:1-12.

The theme for today's Scribblings is; "Forgiveness."

***** **Genesis 50:15-21** *****

Today we will start with our Genesis reading as this will help us when we get to the psalm.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a complex one with many learning opportunities for us, especially in today's society of 'self'. The internal politics of Jacob's family are not a major concern of the narrator, but as the dream continues to work itself out in reality, the lessons for humanity come thick and fast.

If you read the passage carefully, you will notice that the brother's guilt is still front and central in their minds. "The enduring power of guilt and its resultant fear is a matter about which every family knows. Like every family, these brothers know that the only one who can break the cycle and banish the guilt is the wronged party, the one whom they most fear."²

The brothers come before Joseph unable to face up to their previous devious ways and hide behind the authority of their father; **"¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, 'Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.'"**

Then, finally, they find some courage in v18; **"His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. **"We are your slaves."**"** That's a big statement when you consider that they sold Joseph into slavery for 20 shekels of silver. (Genesis 37:28)

"The dream which Joseph dreamed is now unwittingly fulfilled by the brothers. There is no straight line of plot through all of these chapters. There is only a weaving together of "accidents" and "fortuitous" events that are not the doing of the father or the brothers or even of Joseph. There is something dark and deep going on in the story that shapes it in spite of all the actors."³

The question is what? The Genesis narrator is not interested in the question of 'guilt', but there is a clear attachment between 'guilt' and 'dreams'. If you read the story in its entirety, you will realize that both the narrator and the reader know that Joseph's 'dream' is now being worked out in the flesh; the only people who do not know are the 'guilty brothers'.

So is there a connection between these two basic but connected human experiences? Is there a hidden message in this narrative that is timeless and relevant to us today? Perhaps. Perhaps the clue is in v20; **"²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives";** and the answer in v21, **"²¹ "So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them."**

How much guilt do we all carry for things that we have done; for things that we have not done? Maybe your dreams hold the key to freedom. Don't be afraid to seek God's solution.

***** Psalm 103:1-13 *****

If you could only choose one psalm to accompany you on your desert island experience, this psalm would be a worthy contender. It is a beautiful piece of work being a hymn and a prayer all wrapped up into one. And if you are new in learning “How to pray”, this makes a great place to start.

Professor James L Mays writes; “Psalm 103 has been the favored praise of sinners. In every age, in liturgical contexts from Communion service to graveside, in the prayers of the simple and the sophisticated, the words of the psalm have been the means of remembering that the LORD is gracious.”⁴

“God knows we are mortal, evanescent -- here then gone in a blink of God's eye. And God knows that in spite of our hopelessly limited temporal and spatial perspectives, we presume to live and act as if we know *anything* (sometimes even *everything*). To this arrogance God responds with merciful patience and understanding.”⁵

Concentrate on these two verses; v6 **“The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed”**, and v10; **“He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay according to our iniquities.”**

Or if you prefer from the KJV; ⁶**“The LORD executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed”**, and ¹⁰**“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.”**

Now put on your ‘Joseph’ hat from our Genesis lection, and read verses 1 to 6. Then put on one of the ‘guilty brothers’ hats and read verses 7 to 13. Did you notice how the psalm ‘fits’ them almost perfectly?

Whilst doing some back ground reading I found the following commentary from the Reverend Charles Simeon, M.A., Senior fellow of Kings College, Cambridge, dated MDCCCXXXVI. It’s not particularly up to date but I loved both the English and the sentiment, and it seemed particularly apposite.

“That God *deserves* all possible love from his creatures on account of his own perfections, can admit of no doubt: and we can easily conceive, that persons may be so occupied with an admiration of his perfections, as not to have in their minds any distinct reference to the benefits they have received from him: but that any creature can place himself in the situation of a being who has no obligations to God for past mercies, and no expectation of future blessings from him, we very much doubt: nor are we aware that God any where requires us so to divest ourselves of all the feelings of humanity, for the sake of engaging more entirely in the contemplation of his perfections:

We should contrast our state with that of the fallen angels, who never had a Saviour vouchsafed unto them; and with that of the unbelieving world, who, in consequence of rejecting the Saviour, have perished in their sins. What claim had we, any more than the fallen angels?⁶

Now, remove the ‘guilty brothers’ hat and put your own back on. Then go back and read the psalm in it’s entirety and ponder your position as a loved, fully forgiven child of God. Then ask yourself ... Where do I stand? In a dream? Guilty? Forgiven?

Or with the angels in verse 20; **“Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.”**

“⁷ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Poor Peter ... we have to feel for him as he steps on yet another heavenly banana skin; but on consideration it turns out to be a fair question. Remember that ‘forgiveness’ was not listed in any Israelite code of conduct. An ‘eye for an eye’ and other kinds of reparation were the norm in their day. So Peter suggests seven times, possibly thinking that as this is a holy number representing completeness and perfection, it would be more than adequate for the purpose.

Jesus’ instant reply; **“² I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times”**. *Ouch!!* Buy why 77?

The parable continues with a king wanting to settle his debt with his servants and focus’s on one particular servant who owes him 10,000 bags of gold. (Rather than ‘bags of gold’ the KJV calls them ‘talents’, which I much prefer).

The value of the talents depends on which authoritative source you read. Biblical Scholar John Nolland suggests that 10,000 talents “would pay for something like 200,000 man-years of labour”⁷; which is a lot of money in anyone’s currency and certainly a number that the penniless disciples would have had trouble getting their heads around – almost an imaginary number.

So for Jesus to turn round and say that seven times this number, or 1,400,000 man-years of labour is not enough would be truly mind boggling. From this it follows that they could not even contemplate what 77 x 1,400,000 man-years of labour was as a debt.

Now, of course, this is only a parable. But why a parable? What’s the purpose? Have a quick look at Psalm 78:2, Matthew 13:35 and Matthew 13:10-17 and all will become clear as only those who believe, who do not have hardened hearts, will be able to fully understand the parable.

From today’s vantage point of information technology and ‘connected’ mobile phones you might think this is no longer a valid parable, but I’d argue that it’s just as valid today as it was on the day it was preached by Jesus. Nothing has changed as far as humanity is concerned with many of us being as selfish and self centred as humanity has always been.

OK, I agree, there are many people of faith, including those other than Christians, who do ‘see the message’ of this parable and live accordingly; but equally there are many, if not a majority, who do not.

Consider the Lord’s Prayer. Are there any ‘optional’ verses in it? “Of course not!” I hear you say. Isn’t “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” paraphrasing precisely the message of this parable? And didn’t Joseph do exactly as this parable commands despite it being written a very long time before Jesus.

But what about the psalm? Go back and read verses 6 and 10 of today’s psalm and then marvel at how all the sign posts to God’s forgiveness are pointing in the same direction.

Homework:

Your homework this week is to work out why the king lent the servant this vast sum of money!

***** Romans 14:1-12 *****

Vegan? Don't worry – God loves you.

Vegetarian? Don't worry – God loves you too.

Pescatarian? Don't worry – You are also invited by God to join the party as He loves you too.

Fully fledged, meat eating Bar-B-Q fanatic? – Yup, you guessed; God loves you too.

Whatever your dietary persuasion take note of Paul's teaching; **“³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.”**

So what is going on here? Clearly, we can see that Paul is clarifying his thinking about food and the traditional Jewish rituals and laws associated therewith. You almost get the feeling that he is talking out loud as he struggles with his new understanding and commission. At the same time, he is trying to square the circle with regard to how Jesus often ate with Gentiles, sinners, tax collectors and Pharisees. How are all these juxtapositioned elements of life to be melded into one?

Of course, even today many of us have to face this same conundrum in our everyday lives whereby we find that other people are 'different' to ourselves; and if we are not careful we may well end up being critical of 'the other' to the point of judging them as 'weak', wrong, or simply different. Even Paul made this mistake as you can read in Galatians 2:11-14.

But food is only a small part of Paul's message – it's a smoke screen for what Paul really wants to talk about. The clue is in v1 – **“Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters.”**

“Paul is not therefore simply criticizing these people for having a “weak” or inadequate trust in Christ as their Savior and Lord. Rather, he is criticizing them for lack of insight into some of the implications of their faith in Christ. These are Christians who are not able to accept for themselves the truth that their faith in Christ implies liberation from certain OT/Jewish ritual requirements. The “faith” with respect to which these people are “weak,” therefore, is related to their basic faith in Christ but one step removed from it.”⁸

“Faith” then, is the real subject of this piece of teaching. His message can be summed up as saying; ‘Don't let anything get in the way of your faith; and if you are strong in faith, then help those who are weak.’ In other words, live like Jesus.

We are also told; ⁴**“Who are you to judge someone else's servant?”** which carries on the undertones of today's Matthew reading. The message for us should be loud and clear – Only God can judge the level of your faith, or that of others who you might perceive as 'weak'.

Verse 12 brings us back to earth with a bang; **“So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.”**

Which begs the question - What will you say when you find yourself 'knocking on heavens door'?

Verses 17 and 18 drive the nail home; **“¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.”** Forgiveness follows.

To finish, a short prayer.

I've put together a few different prayers for today that reflect the position we all find ourselves in.

Let us pray ...

Lord, let me not live to be useless.⁹ *(From John Wesley)*

How easy, Lord, it is for me to live with you.
How easy it is for me to believe in you.
When my understanding is perplexed by doubts
or on the point of giving up,
when the most intelligent men see no further
than the coming evening, and know not
what they shall do tomorrow,
You send me clear assurance
that you are there and that you will ensure
that not all the roads of goodness are barred.

From the heights of earthly fame I look back
in wonder at the road that led
through hopelessness
to this place where I can send
mankind a reflection of your radiance.

And whatever I in this life may reflect,
that you will give me;
And whatever I shall not attain,
that, plainly, you have purposed for others.⁹ *(From Alexander Solzhenitsyn)*

Let us make our way together, Lord;
wherever you go I must go;
and through whatever you pass, there too I will pass.⁹ *(From Teresa of Avila)*

In the name of Christ.

Amen

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1. All biblical passages from the NIV.
2. Brueggemann, W. (1982). *Genesis* (p. 370). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.
3. Ibid. p371
4. Mays, J. L. (1994). *Psalms* (p. 326). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
5. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1034
6. Simeon, C. (1836). *Horae Homileticae: Psalms, LXXIII–CL* (Vol. 6, pp. 205–206). London: Samuel Holdsworth.
7. Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text* (p. 756). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.
8. Moo, D. J. (1996). *The Epistle to the Romans* (p. 836). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
9. The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer, 2009, SPCK. p284,285