

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020

St. John's from Home

Gen. 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Rom. 11:1-2A, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

*And now do not be distressed,  
or angry with yourselves,  
because you sold me here;  
for God sent me before you to preserve life.*

Last week the story of Joseph began with a bit of family treachery. The impression I remember from childhood tellings of this story was of a starry-eyed and innocent Joseph, wholly undeserving of his brothers' spite for being dad's favourite.

But there's a bit more to this story, if we were to read it a bit more closely. Joseph was not only the favourite of his father's, he *knew* he was his dad's favourite, and was a bit of a twerp about that in at least two ways. Not only did Joseph insist on constantly wearing, in front of his brothers, the fancy clothes that his dad gave only to him, Joseph apparently told his brothers he had a dream about them—a dream in which they all bowed before him.

Imagine a kid playing the brand new Playstation that *he* got for Christmas, asking his sister what she got: "What? You got socks? That sucks. The Playstation I got is amazing." Only to respond to his sister's aggravation by saying "it's ok. Someday you'll understand just how awesome I am."

So Joseph was a bit of a twerp of a brother. The brothers, though, turn out to be, well, extraordinarily incompetent in the ways they took things out on Joseph. First they conspire to kill Joseph, but apparently they don't quite have the grit to follow through. So they throw him into a pit, and then stop for lunch, at which point they get the idea to sell Joseph into slavery. But they're too slow and inept to do that very well. Because as they ate their lunch, traders come along, and finding a perfectly sellable person conveniently left in a hole in the ground, the traders pull Joseph out themselves and *they* sell Joseph into slavery.

So for all their conspiring, they get no profit from their exploit, but nevertheless deserve the blame for the situation. You can't imagine them going home to dad to easily explain things away.

Gen. 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Rom. 11:1-2A, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

"It wasn't us who sold him into slavery, it was the Midianites, dad."

"And why was my favourite son in a pit though?"

"Well, because we were going to kill him but we couldn't go through with it?"

Inept as they are, the brothers are on the hook for this one.

And it's an act that hangs over the whole of the Joseph story in two ways: it's the sin that haunts the brothers for years and years; and more strangely, it creates the opportunity for their own salvation, which in turn keeps alive the promise God makes to us all.

On the one hand, all the brothers get to keep is the secret about the sin of their treachery. No truth, and no reconciliation without the truth. The father mourns, and the brothers are either comfortable with the lie, or are sick with guilt. And so sin is compounded by sin, as year after year, at all those painfully quiet dinner tables, as their father mourned the tragic disappearance of his favourite son, as all the brothers sit in silence, keeping the truth from being told. No truth, so no healing.

On the other hand, though, God is good, and can redeem even this treachery, this loss, this guilt, this inability to face the truth: because along the way, almost by miracle, Joseph goes from being a slave and a prisoner in Egypt, to being the Pharaoh's top lieutenant, with wealth and a family a whole lot of power. Joseph is saved from his unfair fate, and comes out quite well, as it turns out.

But the salvation isn't just Joseph's. With his wealth and power, Joseph has control over enough food to feed the world at a time when the world was starving, including the family that mourned him, including the brothers who watched him be carried into slavery. And so when his brothers come to Joseph for grain, not knowing he was that the powerful man before them was their brother, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and he tells the truth about what happened: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt."

Gen. 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Rom. 11:1-2A, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

And all at once there's no secret left to be kept; the brothers had done what they had done, and there was no way around what happened—only through it. It was the truth, not only a revelation of Joseph's identity, but of what they had done to their brother: "I am the one whom you sold into Egypt."

God is strange, and the grace of God is strange too. The judgment for sin here, if we were to call it that, is in the *result* of the sin: a broken family, a mourning father, and the sickness of keeping secrets. But the strange grace comes as a result of the sin, too, as Joseph describes it: "... do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

God's way is not to reward the unfairly treated only to leave the guilty in their sin and despair; God's way is to make something amazing, extraordinary, and good, even out of our untruth, even out of the despair of our secrets, even out of the sin we fear to name.

And if we look closely, we can see this here. The salvation of Joseph's family comes with transformative truth. Joseph ceases to torment his brothers, and tells them who he truly is. And as a result the brothers have to face the fact of their own silence and face their father with the truth: "Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.'" And so there is salvation from starvation: "You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have." And through this truth there is *reconciliation*. Brother falls upon the neck of brother and weeps. And children are restored to their parent. And not only is this one family saved—the promise of God made to Abraham, that the world would be blessed in *this* family, is kept alive.

The sin of the brothers is *felix culpa*, a happy fault, a sin that is itself the ground of redemption. Like the fall from Eden that leads to the hope of a greater heaven, and the swing of a hammer that drives the nails of death into a cross that brings life, sin itself is transformed into the concrete reality

Gen. 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Rom. 11:1-2A, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

of salvation: the sin of secretly selling their brother into slavery, becomes the way the brothers learn to be truthful; the breaking up of a family is the beginning of their restoration to one another; the sin of selling a brother into destitution becomes the way they are saved from starvation; putting God's promise to the test becomes the way a promise made to the world is kept.

But even the way that the sin of Joseph's brothers is redeemed by God through their opportunity to learn to be truthful, by restoring that family to one another, by saving that family from starvation, and by preserving the promise God had made with Abraham, it was nevertheless a good and a glory that did not last. What is good and glorious in one time, becomes an opportunity for suffering to set in over time.

Next week, our reading from Exodus will begin with a new king rising in Egypt "who did not know Joseph." The settlement of God's chosen family in Egypt—once their salvation from famine—becomes an opportunity for their enslavement. The good given to Jacob's family, in time becomes an evil under new circumstances.

This is the warp and the woof of Genesis. Genesis tells the story of how God's promise that the world would be blessed is continually threatened, and continually renewed. (And Exodus itself will tell another story: of the keeping of God's promise by setting his people free from slavery in Egypt.) And as much as we might want to say that the promise of blessing is made sure in Christ, the life of the church, too, is a life of both suffering and renewal, as we wait for the last day, and the ultimate fulfillment of the promise made in Christ. Sometimes it feels as though our community is under threat, sometimes we feel an abundance of blessing. That's the nature of life together—abundance, suffering, an abundance made possible by the healing of our suffering.

One thing is for sure—we don't thrive on untruth, any more than Joseph's brothers did. Sometimes we speak spitefully, hurting others, and alienating ourselves from one another in process. Sometimes it takes time to recognise the sins of the past and their cost, and to begin on the path of healing. And sometimes still we face the truth, and with courage we tell it in

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020

St. John's from Home

Gen. 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Rom. 11:1-2A, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

love—often not without pain. But like Joseph and his brothers and his family, our painful past, maybe even our painful present, can be what begins the process of being restored to one another, where we are set upon a path we couldn't see before, we begin to thrive in ways we never knew were possible, and we become open more fully to God's promise of salvation.

May it be so for us. May we be communities of truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness. By God's grace may our own sin and pain become the opportunity for our salvation, may God do this work in us and for us, and not just for our sake—but for the sake of a hungry world.

The Revd Dr Preston DS Parsons