

Genesis 45: 1-15

Psalm 133

Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32

St. Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

Pentecost 12 2023.

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“For God sent me before you to preserve life.”

Genesis 45: 5b

In our rhythm of Sunday readings, for the past few weeks, we have been reading about Joseph and the other sons of Jacob... Joseph, we recall, was despised by his brothers, who basically kidnapped him and sold him. Joseph, after a wild set of adventures, eventually became a key figure in the Egyptian government, responsible for the distribution of grain during a global famine. Joseph's brothers are absolutely shocked when Joseph reveals himself to them. This sets in motion a series of events, whereby the entire extended family moves to Egypt. (Later, the descendants of Jacob will become slaves in Egypt, but that's another story...)

What I would like us to consider carefully this morning is that what appeared to be an absolute disaster, in God's great purposes, turned out to be a story of salvation... Joseph had been alienated from his family; he had been sold to Midian traders. Joseph spent years in an Egyptian jail cell, even though he was innocent (Joseph was wrongfully accused of committing adultery with the wife of an Egyptian officer...) In short, things weren't going well for Joseph for a very long time...

And yet – God was still at work, fulfilling his purposes. The Lord God of hosts was providing for his people – ultimately, we believe, a nation was being prepared for the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In the passage we read this morning, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Joseph desperately wants to be reconciled with his brothers... His brother's feelings are a little more mixed! Years ago, they had planned to kill their brother Joseph, before selling him to the Midianite traders, and concocting a wild story for their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast... The stupid sins of their youth, which they thought would never be found out, are exposed... So, with Joseph's brothers, there are mixed feelings when they encounter Joseph and his loving initiative of reconciliation, because they are being confronted with their grievous sinfulness. At the same time, there is the physical hunger for nourishment, and the spiritual hunger for reconciliation deep in their hearts...

Now, there are several ways to read the story of Joseph being reconciled with his brothers. Certainly, we can read this story as a history story – and it *is* an ancient history story, set in Egypt about 1800 years before Christ's birth...

Yet, there are other ways to read this story too. Firstly, we can learn once again that even when we are undergoing severe trials and tribulations, God is at work, to fulfil his perfect purposes. Joseph underwent years – *years!* – of suffering, but his commitment to the living God, the God of his ancestors, was unwavering.

In fact, it was partly Joseph's being obedient to God that made his brothers so resentful toward their younger brother!... When Joseph met his brothers in Egypt years later, Joseph had an unwavering confidence that God was working for everyone's good...

I suggest, that is a reminder to us too: It's a pretty troubled world right now. While I was on recent holidays in Nova Scotia, I was reminded that that province is suffering through the natural disasters of substantial wildfires, flooding, and increased severe hurricane risk, all in one calendar year... Closer to North Bay, we are facing increasing food prices and other costs, divisive political discourse, and stresses about suitable and affordable housing. In some of our families, there are quarrels and isolation. We recognize too, that some of gathered here this morning are facing isolation or chronic health problems or other difficulties...

I suggest, however, that we adopt the faith of Joseph – an unwavering conviction in the goodness and mercy of God; a confidence that our little individual human stories are part of one great, overarching, universal story – and that, one glorious day, we will receive that peace...

So, we can read the story of Joseph and his brothers as a history story in the Bible. We can read it as a story of perseverance, for Joseph and for us all... Even more, we can read this as a story about reconciliation – not only reconciliation when there is division within families (as much as we long for that). The story of Joseph and his brothers can point ahead, to the perfect story of our reconciliation with God the Father, through the finished work of Jesus Christ, by the power of his Holy Spirit...

Christians understand that, by ourselves, we are naturally alienated from God, because sin and perfect goodness can't mix together. However, Christ's death on the cross overcomes this alienation, and we are restored; reconciled; *brought home*...

St. Paul explains clearly this work of reconciliation, so that we all become ministers and ambassadors. II Corinthians 5 includes:

So 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. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (vv. 16-21)

Elsewhere, St. Paul explains it again:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us [...] having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

For those of us who are more drawn to the parables than the unpacking the wisdom of St. Paul, we might recall the Parable of the Prodigal Son: The son was so broken, and had been so foolish. But the father longs to be reconciled with his estranged son, and runs to meet him, and throws a party in his honour! That's a picture of God longing to embrace us, as it were, in his loving arms...

So, we see that the work of Jesus Christ is to reconcile relationships between people and God. God also wants reconciliation *within* churches and families and human relationships. First John 3: 23: "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." To seek reconciliation among one another is part of the package of the gospel... God longs for reconciliation, not estrangement...

The sacramental practice of reconciliation is to help bring home this sense of being reconciled with God, and with one another...

(For those who enjoy books, I recommend a recent book by Justin Welby, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, *The Power of Reconciliation*. He writes about the hard and rewarding work of reconciliation within marriages and families, or as broad as international conflicts...)

Read this way, Joseph can also be a kind of picture (what they call a "type") of *Jesus Christ*... Joseph wasn't in the wrong, but he longed for reconciliation with his brothers. (The brothers were very aware of their wrongdoing.) In the same way, Jesus Christ came for us, longing for the reconciliation of the whole world. We might be like Joseph's brothers, aware of our foibles and our failures – but don't let this stop us from receiving the beautiful gift of reconciliation and eternal life...

Whether we read Joseph being reconciled with his brothers as history; or as a story of perseverance in difficulties; or as a sign of our reconciliation with God and with one another, let's take the story of Joseph and his brothers to heart, confident in God's mercies and love; now and for ever.

Amen.