

Pentecost 15
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Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalms 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

A shift in reality: God goes before us to bring us life

Have you ever had an experience that caused you to completely reassess a series of events, or a relationship, or even to review your understanding of life up to the present time. People who thought they were members of a family and then discovered they were adopted or born to a different parent have lived through that experience. People who have found themselves the victim of long-term betrayal in their relationship have had that experience, as have those whose trust has been betrayed in other ways. The experience of such a sudden shift in reality takes a lot to come to terms with. This was the case in Jacob's family. When the brothers heard the Grand Visier of Egypt say: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" their whole world collapsed. A mighty fear gripped them. How could this be? What revenge would Joseph now take? [Many thoughts in this sermon are drawn from W Brueggeman, *Genesis*.]

In the days of their childhood their father's favouritism towards Joseph and his dream in which he lorded it over them evoked murderous rage amongst his brothers. They sold him for 20 pieces of silver to merchants bound for Egypt and pretended he had been killed by a wild beast. We know, but they did not, that Joseph rose to high office in Egypt. As he ascended the political ladder Joseph may have begun to understand the dream in which the sun and moon and stars bowed before him, but what of his family giving homage? There was no long service leave plan that would have allowed him to return in regal splendour to Canaan to have his family fall at his feet. If, in the intervening years, Joseph had forgotten or dismissed the dream it must have returned to mind when his brothers arrived. At first he showed himself a true son of his trickster father, keeping his identity secret, terrorising his brothers and putting them to the test. Whatever uncertainty they experienced in the process was far exceeded by the horror of the revelation of his identity. "I am Joseph!" The dead one was alive! The betrayed one had returned in power! The brothers now knew the dream was real and they were in grave danger, not only because he could destroy them, but their father would see the truth of their actions.

The brothers' fear can be compared with the fear some experienced on Easter morning, a fear born of an encounter with new life following the betrayal and savage resistance to God's ways expressed in Jesus. From that moment on the whole of life had to be reinterpreted. What had seemed like disposal and death to us, God had woven into a pathway to new life.

There are two things to take from the Joseph story. The first is that the badly wronged Joseph is able to break the cycle of violence, conspiracy and deceit that has characterised his family's history. It was well within his means to do otherwise but he offers his brothers reconciliation and life. "I am Joseph" does not announce a period of vicious ethnic cleansing. It is a word of newness that reinterprets the family history and offers the gift of a new future, characterised by hospitality, reconciliation and restored unity: shalom - real peace.

It was more than human insight that allowed Joseph act in this way. Joseph had lived with the dream for a long time and come to understand its Source. True Wisdom enters the picture. There is no previous hint Joseph was part of God's purpose, but here we see the theologian at work announcing a new possibility of life. He reads the same history as his brothers but is able to see, and to say, that God did something different with their dastardly intentions that eliminates the need for revenge. What the brothers meant for evil God used for good. Can we grasp the depth of this statement? Resistance to the dream and disposal of the dreamer did not defeat God's freedom or purpose. At a time of deprivation and peril, God saved the lives of the family of Israel, and many more besides.

The second thing to take from this story flows from this. God accompanies us in our life. God does God's own saving work. And the arena of choice for that work is the flesh and blood of drama of human life. God is free and makes use of all human effort even the dark side of human planning. This story does not show God overriding the brothers' sordid intentions. And it does not show God as dependent on them doing the right thing. Humans remain free not to choose God. And God remains free to continue to be at work in our lives in the strangest of circumstances. This does not mean that when they disposed of Joseph the brothers were doing God's work. It is not a work of God to seek to destroy life. But it does mean God chose to accompany Joseph and the brothers in their life, in all its aspects. And God did this for the gracious purpose of bringing life out of death and new beginnings out of loss. In Romans Paul says of God [11:36] *for from him, and through him and to him are all things*. The story of Joseph makes it clear God relentlessly dreams of life for the world and continues to work for this, invisibly, mysteriously, using all aspects of our humanity, even our refusal of the saving gift of this dream.

But the freedom of God to be at work in all parts of human life does not set us free to do awful things in the world. It made a difference that Reuben talked his brothers out of killing Joseph and that Joseph chose to break the cycle of violence and deceit when he was in a position to do so.

Perhaps we have seen a little of this in the Australian apology to the stolen generations. We are pleased with the Apology, but have we yet shown real understanding of the loss suffered by those who were sent into exile from their families? Or are we still caught up in resistance and denial? Achieving full reconciliation is difficult because to do so we have to come to terms with the truth about our life and revise our history - just as Joseph's brothers' had to when they stood before the one they sent away. The price of restorative justice is not cheap, because real empathy can only exist when we are prepared to stand in the shoes of another. And that is what God has done for us in Christ.

Eric Edgar Cooke, was serial murderer who rampaged through the suburbs of Perth in the late 1950s and early 1960s, causing irretrievable suffering to many, including two men who were wrongfully imprisoned for his crimes and released many years after once the truth was known. *Australian Story* once showed a restorative justice session between those affected by this crime. It was interesting to see the differences in the people who spoke. Some were unable to offer forgiveness. One of those wrongfully accused left and did not receive the forgiveness that was there for him. But as different family members spoke those who had been most open to the truth of the situation were able to turn this shocking experience into something that yielded them wisdom and life.

When we encounter suffering, and see it inflicted on others, we cannot say this is the will of God, for God's will is for life, and all that that means. But we can still live in hope that even from such sordid and destructive things, something life-giving may emerge, for us and for others. The life of Joseph the dreamer reveals that God is free and continues to choose to be free for us. There was another Joseph who dreamed dreams that shepherded a child and his mother into life and safety. As a man, that child was disposed of by us but God raised him up in resurrection light, to reveal that God is still free and transcends the worst we can do, to offer us the gift of a new future.
