

St Columba
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Genesis 45:1-15

Matt 15:21-28

Bold steps or every cloud has a silver lining

Today we come to the end of the saga of Abraham and Sarah's descendents that we have been following. It is not the end of the story, just of the sequence of events that we have been following from the initial journey of Abraham and Sarah, to the reconciliation of their great grandchildren Joseph and his eleven brothers – the brothers who as a result of sibling rivalry tried to sell him into slavery, as the story is told in the book of Genesis. There are no clear historical markers to provide verifiable evidence that any of the story actually happened, or if it did take place as told, then when precisely it occurred. But, despite the lack of 'real' markers such as the name of the pharaoh in Joseph's story, scholars suggest it was probably over an extended period in or about the 14th century BCE. We have to remember that saga is not history, however the cycles of stories about this family trace the oral, historical tradition and developments as the nation Israel emerges; as two streams of story-telling come together in the story of Joseph. The reconciliation of the 12 brothers sets the scene for another saga, that of the twelve tribes of Israel. 'Israel', the name given to Jacob when he wrestled with the 'unknown man', now shifts from an individual to a nation, as God's promise unfolds and different streams of the Hebrew people recognise their common ancestry. The portion of the story we hear this morning prefigures the migration of the Hebrew people to Egypt to escape famine and then their eventual departure from Egypt where they become enslaved, and their resettlement in Canaan as the people Israel.

Joseph's story is a well-told, consecutive narrative explaining why the Hebrew people came to be in Egypt, and how they left, eventually becoming known as the nation Israel. Joseph's story is also one of struggle and deception, of trickery and then reconciliation; as told by the Hebrew people it is a story of God's faithfulness and commitment to life throughout all the ups and downs of this dysfunctional family and their travels feuds and reunions; it is a story of salvation.

Today we hear

- How Joseph reflects on his life so far and tries to make sense of it
- how Joseph reveals himself to his brothers who are seeking sanctuary in Egypt in time of trouble,
- their fear when they recognise him,
- the forgiveness Joseph extends,
- the breaking down of separation caused by wealth and power as Joseph invites his brothers to cross the space that is around him and come close to him, and
- his promise to maintain them all in life during the remaining five years of famine.

In reflecting on the readings this week my mind kept slipping to the thuggery and the riots and the looting in Britain that has been reported in the paper this week. I haven't been able to get the reports and pictures out of my mind... Of course Britain is not the only place in Europe where there has been signs of great dissatisfaction with the political leadership and disturbing signs of unrest: Greece, Spain, Italy ...

It has seemed to me that we are in a time of 'global famine' as it were (real famine if you take Somalia and the rest of Eastern Africa into the equation) the debt crisis and escalating unemployment are pressing in on people everywhere.

In New Zealand we are not exempt; our children are hungry, our youth unemployed, our families struggling to find enough food and money for life's basics, I wonder when the pain and anger will flare up in a physical expression of social unrest?

Only 10 days ago we were told that the wealth of the richest 20 people had increased by 20%. 'Wealth creators, national treasures' we should know them as.

In the light of today's reading from Genesis I wonder when those who suffer and carry the burden of this 'world-famine', this global pain, will be invited across the gap that separates those with more than sufficient to live from those without sufficient to live; without hope of any way out of their predicament.

Something bold is called for, something perhaps unheard of or undreamed of such as a Canaanite woman shouting after Jesus and his disciples in an unseemly manner demanding to be taken seriously and heard so that the needs of her daughter for life would be taken care of.

The disciples want her sent away and Jesus is of a mind to oblige them when he answers the woman saying "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But that was not good enough for this mother! Oh no! She dared to challenge Jesus for his racism and hardness of heart for he had likened her and her daughter to dogs!

I like to think Jesus was shamed when he heard his words reflected back to him! He certainly had the grace to change his mind and provide for the daughters restoration to life.

This woman was bold; Joseph was gracious and set aside any grudge he might have felt against his brothers. The one dared to demand what was necessary, the other willing to share what was needed from what he had access to ... and most surprisingly perhaps, both closed the gap of status and wealth that separated them from the 'other'! Both took a bold step to act differently and outside expectations!

Joseph understood that the life-giving goodness of God had enabled him, through his many trials and tribulations, to also offer life giving hope and support. He knew that he had a responsibility to show compassion and care to others in their time of need.

Last week Keith spoke of keeping your eyes on the ball, of not losing sight of what is important. This week that message is underlined again in these stories.... what is important is compassion for others; the health and wellbeing of those we share this planet with for we are all brothers and sisters.

- We are called in the name love and justice, God's name, to step into the space that separates us from one another.

- We are called to demand boldly what is needed to live; needed for health and wellbeing, self-esteem and an opportunity to participate in society, and not to give up demanding these things.
- We are called to share compassionately what we have

If the debt crisis precipitates a crumbling of belief in the accrual of wealth for its own sake as a primary goal of humanity and mark of success, then this cloud will have a silver lining; humanity will have an opportunity to reorient its value base. Perhaps then we will hear the call to justice making and can look on the face of God in each other without fear.