

Date: 16 August 2020
Place: Papakura ZOOM
Sunday of the year: 20th in Ordinary Time
Theme: Subversive Forgiveness
Lesson: /Genesis 45: 1-15
Psalm: 133:
Epistle: Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32
Gospel: Matthew 15: 21-28

Time: 0930

In the name of our God who bestows forgiveness, blessings and everlasting life on us.
Amen.

Did Jacob ever know the full story of what happened to his beloved Joseph? I wonder? We are not told.

Did the Canaanite woman follow Jesus after this event and how was he towards her? We are not told.

Or is it as the interpretation of Paul's words given in the Message a possibility for both these stories –

Romans 11: 32 – “God makes sure that we all experience what it means to be outside so that God can personally open the door and welcome us back in”. The story of Joseph clearly tells us how God acted through his life, and also the story of the Canaanite woman gives us a glimpse of a chink in Jesus' armour – more later.

I think that I struggle with those words of Paul's – it does not have the same sense of blessing that so often Jesus' words have. Today's theme is Subversive Forgiveness. I wondered at the use of the word subversive. It is not a word that I would have applied to Jesus. I looked up a definition:

Subversion refers to a process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed, in an attempt to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority, hierarchy, and social norms. Subversion is used as a tool to achieve political goals because it generally carries less risk, cost, and difficulty as opposed to open belligerency.

There is no doubt that both Joseph, Paul and the Canaanite woman changed their own way of being in these stories. For me, there is also a strong sense of God's mercy in each of the readings, which leads us to being reconciled with each other.

Let's look at both the story of Joseph and the Canaanite woman.

We all know the story of Joseph well – Jacob's love of one son in a different way than the others, the jealousy which that creates, the judgement of the brothers of what they perceived as Joseph's arrogance, the scheming, sex, politics and intrigue all contribute to this very human story.

Can you imagine the scene, from today's reading, with Joseph – this person they do not know - the brothers would have been fearful of what was to happen to them at the hands of this strong person in authority – how would they have interpreted Joseph sending away his retainers.

Joseph would have at long last been able to make sense of his dreams and of the meaning of his life. What an incredible mixture of emotions he must have been going through and yet his sense of God was so strong that he knew that he must forgive his brothers in order to protect them. Joseph could have used his power to demand the death of his brothers – that was not Joseph's way, because that is not God's way, and Joseph knew that his guidance and protection came from God – he was God's man. Joseph reassured his brothers - God sent me to preserve life not destroy it. Joseph's virtual collapse in the presence of his brothers reveals his awareness of God's role in his life as much as it reveals his humanity. The retainers were sent out in case they thought that his tears were a sign of weakness.¹

This story of Joseph is most importantly about God at work through Joseph's life so that God's people are saved – we hear about Jacob and his family, but it is about the whole of humanity and God's desire for us to be reconciled to each other and to God. God was at work to bring good out of evil.

How often do we find it hard to understand where God is in the negative events of our lives – Joseph's story reminds us differently. God was with Joseph in all that happened in his life. God is with us in the negative experiences of our lives. I have found that it is often in

¹ Yr A p.444

retrospect that I identify God's presence – just take a moment to think about your life. Joseph's story tells us of what the grace of God can do in human life: transform a curse into a blessing. If we listen carefully Joseph is also a metaphor for God: God who has every reason to reject a wayward human family, but who instead loves us even to the point of God's own participation in our suffering.

As Joseph's story tells us about God's activity for the whole of humanity, the story of the Canaanite woman challenges Jesus' own words about family. The passage before this Jesus has been arguing with the Pharisees – the Pharisees challenge Jesus about his authority, and he in turn was challenging them about their understanding of Law, and so of God. This debate would have happened around scriptural interpretation with every person believing their interpretation was correct. Jesus wants them to understand that his ministry is a continuation of God's mission in calling and to the people of Israel – the Pharisees try to tell him differently! Who has the right to interpret tradition? In our Anglican Communion we have a system of challenging tradition by our Synods which I suspect will be on ZOOM this year, which then goes to the wider Anglican Communion where all the Archbishops of the Communion meet and debate – Lambeth.

Then the Canaanite woman appears – even though Jesus has criticised the defining of who God is by the Pharisees he still saw that discussion within the family. The woman won't let him – she challenges what Jesus has been saying to his own people. In Mark's gospel Jesus does not seem to be so thrown by her comment, but here in Matthew, Jesus is a little lost for words – she is only asking for the leftover crumbs. Remember, a couple of Sundays ago we heard about the feeding of the 5000 and there were plenty of crumbs left over from that meal.

Perhaps this is about Jesus coming to a fuller understanding of his mission and the scope of it – he quickly acknowledges her with the words 'Great is your faith'.

At another level the earliest Christians were also struggling with this issue – Matthew’s church believed that Jesus came for God’s people – the people of Israel, and not for everyone.

God’s call is what brings us into being, and his gift is to make that being real, by sharing with us his own life in Jesus. In the worlds of Joseph, Paul and the Canaanite woman there was domination which relies upon division, resentments and conformity in order to maintain status and power. A spirit of forgiveness, care and kindness subverts this power by making possible unity. Yes, in the COVID environment we are seeing some of that. Whenever we are tempted to make Christianity something small and anxious, we need reminding that even God’s crumbs can satisfy us completely.² We need to remember that we are forgiven and yes truly blessed. Amen.

² Jane Williams p.100 - 101