

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany – 24 February 2019

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Colin Sinclair, Minister of Palmerston Place Church, Edinburgh, for his thoughts on the seventh Sunday after Epiphany.

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[Genesis 45:3-11, 15](#)

This is one of the most dramatic scenes in Scripture. Years have passed since Joseph's brothers first put him down a pit then sold him to passing Midianite traders. All that time they have lived the lie before their father that Joseph was dead, torn to pieces by a wild animal. It was a shared conspiracy they could never talk about even among themselves. Perhaps they had even come to believe it themselves. Perhaps during the night they had, on sleepless nights, played the scene over, time and again and wondered if only they could have wound the clock back.

Whatever their fantasy, nothing prepared them for what now happened. They had struggled to make sense of the Governor's actions and attitude towards them. They had been accused of being spies and saw this unfair attack as punishment for how they had treated Joseph. Then they found silver among the grain and couldn't comprehend where it had come from. Their second visit to Egypt was just as bizarre. They were honoured without explanation by a meal from the governor and told that their God had put the silver in their sacks. On their return again there was silver among the grain but more significantly a silver cup was added to Benjamin's sack. When he is arrested the brothers stand by him in a way they never stood by Joseph all these years before. They show a concern for their father and brother that was new since Joseph had last been with them. Judah offers to take his brother's place and suffer instead of him. It was this new attitude that finally breaches Joseph's defences and he breaks into weeping. Their surprise at his tears was nothing compared to their reaction to his first three words, probably spoken, to their surprise, in Hebrew, "I am Joseph!" Terror gripped them as their past wickedness was finally fully revealed.

What followed shows the triumph of grace over judgment. Words of forgiveness and reconciliation come from Joseph's lips. He calls them closer and adds to his opening words the word "brother". "I am your brother, Joseph." He re-establishes the bond their betrayal had broken. Joseph's story shows his profound understanding of God's providence and how God used their wickedness for good. Although twice he says, "You sold me," (vv.4, 5) three times he says, "God sent me ahead of you" (vv.5, 7, 8). Joseph takes seriously their actions, but ascribes ultimate responsibility for the outcome to God. Their abandoned brother had become governor and he would ensure many, who otherwise would have died, would survive the famine. He has been sent "to save lives" (vv.5, 7). Instead of rejecting or punishing them he extends a hand to them and tells to bring his father down to Egypt to see out the famine years. Greeting Benjamin first, he embraced all his family and tears fell freely. Such is the wonder of forgiveness, of mercy and of grace. Healing and restoration had come after all these years.

[Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40](#)

“It’s not fair” is an expression used by all age groups from toddlers to pensioners.

Life is hard and sometimes it seems that other people, indeed the *wrong people*, get off lightly while those, seeking to do right before God and others come off second best. The Psalmist aims to help them recover perspective and faith. He acknowledges that on the surface things do not add up, but adds an extra dimension to their thinking, namely time. In the end they, like everyone else, die and what then? If they do not know God, serve God and love God and others, then all their past achievements will count for nothing and leave them in the dock. The way of faith is to do what is right and leave the outcome to God. Put God first and you will not be disappointed.

In many ways this mirrors Joseph’s tale in all the ups and downs of his colourful life. Put God centre stage, find your peace in God’s presence and you will find balm for your soul. Continue to make correct choices – be patient not angry; don’t work yourself into a lather or you will overreact. Take the long view of life. Evil gets found out. Wickedness will be judged and found wanting. It will be the meek who will inherit the earth.

The Psalmist concludes by reaffirming that salvation and strength comes from the Lord. So then our help and deliverance will be found in God and from God, not independently.

Choose sides carefully and then keep faith.

[1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50](#)

Paul is trying to answer the question about what life looks like beyond the grave. His answer is that we do not have the language or concepts with which to explain it. However Paul wants to assert that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the body we have now and the new body we will have then. To make the point he uses an agricultural metaphor about the seed and the plant it produces. The central point is clear – we will have a new body.

The Christian faith believes in the resurrection of the body not the immortality of the soul. The continuity is that the seed that is planted determines the plant that will grow. The discontinuity is that there is the world of difference between the dry husk of a seed and the living plant that emerges. If you picked up a seed, not knowing what kind it was, you would have little idea of what sort of plant it would become. What is clear, however, is that the transformation is remarkable. Paul emphasises this by pairing opposites – perishable and

imperishable; dishonour and glory; weakness and power; natural and spiritual. Our new body is a fulfilment of God's plan, the goal to which it was always heading. Finally we will resemble less of Adam who was made from the dust of the earth, and more of Jesus, the man from heaven. Such a change must take place if we are to inherit the kingdom of God.

If this is mind-blowing then perhaps this illustration will help. Imagine trying to explain to a baby in the womb what the world that it will shortly be born into will be like. All they have known is darkness, all their food comes from their mother's cord. They have been on their own all their life. How do you begin to explain colour, community, food, life and so much more? Yet they are only a skin's thickness away from the world outside. Once born, through all the discomfort of labour (cf. death), they will feel instinctively at home. So, in life, a seed has to die if the life it carries is ever to emerge. The same is true for us also but we have a prototype model in Jesus who lived, died and rose again, never more to die, to encourage us to hope.

[Luke 6:27-38](#)

This part of Jesus' teaching is sometimes called "The Sermon on the Plain" as it repeats aspects of the longer Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7-9). This section is not difficult to understand but it is very difficult to do! The call to love God, to love our neighbour and to love one another is added to with one final call, to love our enemies. To love those who are different from us, to love those who disagree with us, to love those who are difficult and demanding and delight to do us down is asking too much, surely!

Even to describe them in such language shows that such love is beyond us. How can we love those who undermine, belittle and demean us? How can we love those who are actively seeking our harm and perhaps even our destruction? No wonder we need grace!

Jesus is very practical and pragmatic in the examples he uses by way of application. Whatever we feel, our actions should do them good. "Love is not a victim of our emotions but a servant of our will" (John Stott). Our attitude should be one of blessing not cursing, of prayer not provocation. Instead of retaliation, vulnerability; where exploited be generous in response; let loans become gifts and follow the Golden Rule. This countercultural way of grace marks the Christian community out from others. Jesus makes the point by showing how the default position of the world is self-interest. We love because we are loved. We do good to those who return the favour. We lend where repayment is guaranteed. But go to a different gear, operate on a different level and you will show the world to which family you belong. You will represent the Father, will receive a reward from Him and be a visual

aid to the world. For all God our Father is asking is that His children show the same mercy to others as God shows to us.

Easy to say but so hard to do. May God have mercy on each of us that we may be merciful to others.

Sermon ideas

The controlling idea is that of loving your enemy. The Joseph story gives a wonderful example of how Joseph was able to forgive his brothers, despite all they had done to him so many years before. Telling that story afresh and tying it up to Jesus' words could be very powerful. The Psalm is a salutary reminder that evil is temporary and death is the great leveller. We need to get our attitude right if we are not going to be embittered or cynical. That begins with God and when we reaffirm our trust in God then we can dare to engage in the adventure of faith both by living right and loving our enemies.

It may have been a journey such as the Psalmist describes that took Joseph on a journey from hate to love. The teaching of Jesus in Luke gives some concrete examples that we can easily understand but that makes them also harder to run away from.

Time with children

Love your enemies

Who is in and who is out? Who is on *my* side and who is on *your* side. We all like to draw lines between people. *My* family, *my* school, *my* team, *my* city, *my* country and so we could go on. While is not all bad to put people into groups, we need to make sure that whatever lines we draw that love able to cross over them.

I am going to say a word and you are to tell me the opposite:

Happy (sad); big (small); tall (short); close (open); stop (go); over (under); love (hate)

Ah there we have it. We love some and hate others. But that is not the Jesus' way. Jesus reminded us of how important love is. He reminded people "to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength". He also said "love your neighbour as yourself". Then he added a new commandment for his followers. "Love one another as I have loved you." But

just in case someone is left out of these three circles of love He added a fourth. “Love your enemy”. How hard is that!

If we are going to live the Jesus’ way how should we respond?

When someone shouts at you. (*Answer: Speak kindly to them anyway.*)

When someone hits you. (*Answer: Don’t hit back, just walk away and get an adult to help you.*)

When someone takes something that is yours. (*Answer: Give when whatever they need. Don’t steal something from them.*)

When someone asks you for something. (*Answer: Give it to them.*)

Why should I behave like that? Well Jesus commands us to do so, so just do it! More than that – have you ever done something wrong before? (Yes)

Have your parents or friends stopped loving you? (No)

Do you think that God stopped loving you? (No)

If they can keep on loving you, then we need to keep on loving others. It is easy to love someone who loves you back. But what about someone who mean to you, or says horrid things about you or makes fun of you? That is not so easy is it?

Optional Game: Love Your Enemies Bean Bag Toss

Set up three bucket or baskets are increasing distances from a starting line.

Label the first bucket ‘Family,’ the second bucket, ‘Friends,’ and the last bucket, ‘Enemies.’

Take turns throwing the bean bag into each bucket.

Explain that it’s easy to love our family and friends but a little bit harder to love our enemies.

Explain that *It was pretty easy to get the bean bag in the first two buckets but harder to get it in the last one. It’s the same with loving people. It’s easy for us to love our friends and family but a little harder to love our enemies but we can still do it.*

Jesus said we are to love our enemies because when we do we are acting like children of God. If we only love those who love us then that is what most people do. We are, however, to go a step further.

When we do

- we show in practice God's love to others
- we set a good example for others to follow
- we might even turn enemies into friends

So if you can think of someone who is your enemy what can you do?

Ask for ideas. Here are some suggestions: pray for them; forgive them and start again; never talk badly about them; help them – study, make friends, practise a sport or activity; list their good points in your mind; share with them about Jesus.

Prayers

Prayer of approach and confession

Living God,

come to us this day

as we wait upon You.

Prepare our hearts and minds

to meet with You.

You have made Yourself known to us

through prophets and apostles

and above all through Jesus Christ.

Make Yourself known to us afresh today

through Your Word and Spirit.

We gather here, in the company of Your people

that we may know You better

love You with a fresh love

and delight to know and do Your will.

Out of our darkness we come to You for light;

out of our sorrows we come to You for joy;

out of our doubts we come to You for assurance;

out of our worries we come to You for peace;

out of our failures we come to You for forgiveness

draw near to us and meet our every need

We come, conscious of our need for forgiveness

for words spoken which we cannot take back

for opportunities missed that we now regret

and foolish and wilful decisions that have affected others.
Forgive us for attitudes that have puffed us up and put others down
for actions that have hurt others and harmed ourselves
Lord, have mercy on us

Take our lives, cleanse, heal and renew
that we may worship and serve You
with grateful hearts
for Jesus' sake.

(And hear us further, as we pray in the words our Lord taught us. "Our Father...")

Amen

Offertory prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
You were rich yet for our sake became poor
help us to remember
that what we keep we lose
and what we give away we gain.
Take then these brought offerings
given in this and other ways
and use them to fulfil Your purposes on earth
for Your name's sake.
Amen

Prayer of intercession

Gracious God,
draw near we pray to those who are hurting
and bind up the broken-hearted.

We pray for those who have been wounded by their friends;
who have trusted someone only to have their trust betrayed;
who confided in someone only to have their secret repeated;
who helped someone in their hour of need
but were forgotten when their time came;
who were made use of and never even thanked
May they find in You someone whom they can trust

and find their security in Your faithful and transforming love

We pray for those who have been hurt by their loved ones;
who have seen them led astray
by their choices
or the influence of others;
who have seen them turn from the way of holiness
and lose their innocence
and have been helpless to do anything about it
except keep on loving and praying and hoping;
who feel more bitter for the wrongs inflicted on their loved ones
than for any inflicted on themselves
and who turn to You for grace and mercy
and the ability to forgive.
May they find in Your family, the family of faith,
acceptance, support and courage to face another day.

We pray for those who have lost their peace,
who cannot relax or sit still
but must always be feverishly doing something;
for those who cannot sleep without medication
for those who are sorely tempted
and for whom defeat is a daily experience;
for those whose desires and passions are too strong
who find self-control too hard
and are overwhelmed at their own weakness
May they find a peace that passes understanding,
a strength to choose right which only You can give,
and a love that brings healing and hope.

Bless those who are imprisoned in poverty.
Bless those for whom violence or the threat of it is never far away.
Bless those who are ill or in pain.
Bless those where relationships are not right.
Bless those who have lost their faith.
Bless those who are sad and sorrowing.

You are our refuge and strength from all the storms of life
Grant peace to our souls,
joy in our hearts
light in our darkness
and in all things we pray, be with us each step of the way
for Jesus' sake.
Amen

Musical suggestions

Opening praise

- CH4 81 – “I to the hills” (Psalm 121)
- CH4 132 – “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”

Children's hymn

- CH4 522 – “The Church is wherever”
- CH4 170 – “Give thanks with a grateful heart”
- CH4 204 – “I am the Church, you are the Church”
- “Jesus love is very wonderful” (Various sources, e.g. Junior Praise 139)

Middle hymn

- CH4 467 – “All my days”
- CH4 198 – “Let us build a house”
- CH4 706 – “For the healing of the nations”

Hymn to sing before the sermon

- CH4 97 – “O God you search me and know me”
- CH4 318 – “Lord you were rich”

Appropriate closing hymn for the theme

- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness”
- CH4 237 – “Look forward in faith”
- CH4 519 – “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

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