



Painting by L. Bourgeois

Week 3: Joseph: Betrayed, Sold, Hidden in Plain Sight

(Genesis 45. 1-15)

Rev Canon Professor James Walters

Bible Reading

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you

many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me; do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there, since there are five more years of famine to come, so that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

Reflection

We all know that difference can divide. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny are all ways in which human beings mistreat and direct violence towards those who are different from themselves. But what truly shocks us about the human condition is that violence can just as easily be directed towards those who are like us, those who share our culture, our ethnicity and our religion. Orthodox clergy in both the Russian and Ukrainian churches have described the war between their countries as a fratricidal war, a war between brothers. Their peoples have a shared history, a shared faith, a shared story.

And so Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and all Ukraine has described it “as a repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy.”

In the opening chapters of the Bible, brother kills brother. Cain kills Abel because he wants to be the one whom the Lord favours. And as the story goes on, this theme of enmity between brothers continues. Isaac and Ishmael are the next set of half-brothers who are rivals for the favour of their father Abraham, coming together only to bury him. Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau are similarly at war as Jacob steals his brother's birth right and Esau vows to kill him.

But this lineage of warring brothers comes to an end in the book of Genesis with the one whom Jewish tradition calls Yosef HaTzadik, Joseph the Righteous. As this figure of righteousness, Joseph tends to be given much more prominence in Judaism than in our Christian reading of the Old Testament. To us he may just be the seemingly arrogant and (literally!) colourful character in the entertaining story retold in a thousand school productions of Andrew Lloyd Webber's hit musical. We probably reflect little on this story in our own faith. But we should think again, because for us Christians, the “righteousness” with which Jewish tradition associates him foreshadows two aspects of the righteousness of Jesus.

First, Joseph resists temptation. This happens when he is sold into slavery in Egypt and resists the persistent attempts at seduction by the wife of his master Potiphar. She eventually frames him when he won't return her advances. Adultery is a carnal temptation. But psychologically, it's also the temptation to be the favoured one, to feel chosen in opposition to a rival or in the context of a relationship that no longer leaves one feeling chosen.

Christ too resists temptation, a theme we reflect upon in Lent. He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness at the start of his ministry. This was also physical - in the temptation to break his fast by turning stones into bread. But it culminated in the temptation to be the one chosen for power, the one given the kingdoms of the world. So both Joseph and Jesus resist the temptation to be chosen for privilege and pleasure, instead recognising a more sacrificial calling.

And this points to the second way in which Joseph is understood to be righteous. He did not take revenge on the brothers who attempted to kill him. He did not commit the sin of Cain; he forgave his brothers and, in his privileged status in Egypt, pledged to take care of them. As a result, there is no fratricide, there are no winners and losers in the story of Joseph. Instead all are favoured, each of the brothers chosen as the head of Israel's twelve tribes. And this is how the book of Genesis concludes. The cycle of fratricide is brought to an end. Brother forgives brother, and one is not chosen above the other: all are chosen for the purposes of God.

And this, of course, prefigures the heart of the Gospel. Jesus is betrayed by his ‘brother’ Judas and denied by his ‘brother’ Peter. But these are mere tokens of all the treachery and human sin that Jesus takes into himself on the cross. This is why Jesus is described as the sacrifice made once and for all. He is the incarnation of the God who does not hold our sins against us and demand that they be atoned for. He is the atonement, the limitless well of forgiveness to whom we can turn in repentance when we have wronged other people in our own pursuit of favour or the desire to feel chosen.

This link between Joseph's granting of forgiveness to his brothers and the forgiveness Christ brings is perhaps most clearly expressed in the words Joseph uses to express the pardon: “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?” “Do not be afraid” is the constant refrain that heralds the Gospel. The angel Gabriel says it to Mary. Jesus repeatedly says it to his disbelieving disciples. The angel says it to the astonished women who arrive at the empty tomb. And fundamentally we are not to be afraid because God is in charge. Justice belongs to God, not to us. Judgement is God's to enact, not ours to wield over relentless human rivalries. It is God whom we face in our guilt, and in Christ his message to us is forgiveness.

And so, as with the story of Joseph, this points to a righteousness that enables all people to be chosen, knowing that they live with the favour of God such that they need not be consumed by envy or resentment of others. That can be the case in our families and personal lives where we learn to forgive those who have sinned against us because we have the knowledge that God has forgiven us our own sins. And it ought also to be the case in our world, particularly between Christian nations, as we recognise that those whom God has called into being and loved into new life through baptism simply cannot be killed in the pursuit of national ambitions.

So let us pray for all who are at war – in wars of individuals or nations, wars of difference or fratricidal wars - that we may find righteousness through resisting temptation and by knowing that we do not stand in the place of God. We stand before God who, in Christ, has exercised an abundant forgiveness that has favoured and chosen each one of us.

Questions

- What do you think Joseph and Jesus have in common – how does the former look forward to the latter?
- Why is it so difficult to forgive – especially those closest to us?
- What does it really mean to say that Jesus is the 'atonement' for human sins?
- What do you think the emotions of the various people depicted in this picture might tell us about their previous behaviour?

Hymn

Forgive our Sins as we Forgive

(E. Herklots)

Forgive our sins as we forgive
You taught us, Lord, to pray,
But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.

How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs and will not let
Old bitterness depart?

In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew:
What trivial debts are owed to us;
How great our debt to you!

Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls
And bid resentment cease;
Then, bound to all in bonds of love
Our lives will spread your peace.

Hymn Details : https://hymnary.org/text/forgive_our_sins_as_we_forgive
There are many recordings of this hymn available online.

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God,
like Joseph, your only Son was betrayed by those he loved.

As in your mercy you raised Joseph from the pit,
so too you raised Jesus on high, crowning him with honour and glory.

Help us like them to bear courageously the pain of betrayal.

As disciples of Jesus, who prayed even for his persecutors,
free us all from bitterness and every yearning for revenge.

We ask this in his name, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.