

Sermon at Cashmere Presbyterian, Sunday 24th February, 2019

God meant it for good – Dr David Troughton

“So it was not really you who sent me here. It was God.” Genesis 37:8

“We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

Let’s start by supposing:

Suppose you are a teenager of seventeen, with much older brothers - a late arrival, but with a yet another younger one.

If you had dreamed a dream in which all your family bowed down to you, what would you do?

And if you dreamed another like it, with them all doing obeisance to you, what then?

Suppose you were at the brink of being murdered by your brothers, but instead you were put down a dry well; and then you were sold off as a slave and forced to trudge your way to a foreign country, with a strange language and culture.

What would you think as you walked?

Suppose you landed up in a good situation, even advancing to be CEO for the boss! But the boss’s wife propositioned you; you stood by your principles and refused- only to be falsely accused by her of having sexually abused her, and duly landing up in prison. It was her word against yours! How would you react?

Suppose, after a long time, in which prison authorities had given you administrative responsibilities, you were very helpful to another prisoner. He was released, probably saying he would speak up for you. Two years have passed. Not a word is heard. How would you be feeling?

What say you did get released; you landed a top job- and that administrative experience, coupled with your intrinsic nous, and the clout you were given, and God’s blessing, meant that over the next seven years you were very, very successful. Then, one day, you go into a room to meet some foreigners who were bowing to greet you, only to discover - they are your brothers!

How would you handle that?

Those profoundly challenging, puzzling and vexing scenarios were exactly what Joseph had to grapple with. His is an amazing story, a wonderful case study.

Let's put ourselves in his shoes as we listen to part of what happened then.

Genesis 45:3-11, 15.

"So it was not really you who sent me here. It was God." Genesis 37:8

Suddenly all that mess made sense. Now, at this moment, after all those years, when he has matured into a man they did not recognise, right when and where he was needed, here he is!

It was something they would never have thought of. Joseph had not conceived of it. But suddenly those wildest of dreams, dreams that had haunted him, but which he would have totally discounted as the years passed, those dreams were a flesh-and-blood reality!

What God had signalled, God had brought to pass!

All those tough experiences of misunderstanding, of betrayal by people he loved and trusted; of courage in choosing to be honourable; of the sense that he should forgive - but it was too tough, and, what the heck, irrelevant; of struggling to hold on to his trust in God's good purposes for him, even though he kept having to concede he had experienced blessing at each step of the way; of his aching for reconciliation that seemed so utterly impossible that he probably would try and suppress it, and just get on with life; these all, all these had culminated in this moment, this day.

He had walked through valleys of the shadow of death, and God was with him all the way.

No wonder he wept.

Now, three thousand years later, his story still inspires and encourages us.

Clearly, as he related to them, he now was acting in a spirit of forgiveness. How healing and liberating that would be for everyone!

His brothers had seen and lived with their father's grief, knowing all too well the truth of what had actually happened. And they had kept feeling guilt whenever they ruminated over what they had done to Joseph. Now they were there in his presence, agonising, for he might wreak vengeance. They were bound and paralysed by guilt.

Apologise? In these circumstances, they would be all too aware of just how limp and unconvincing an apology would sound in view of the enormity of what they had done. How would it cut it for a spokesman to say something like, "Joseph, I just want to say how sorry we are for what we did"?

Somewhere along the way, Joseph will have struggled with the need to forgive, will even have recognised the damage he would do to himself by nursing grievances.

Forgiving is a process, which has to be forged, to be built into our character. It involves always recognising the seriousness of what has happened, yet it must be sincerely liberating. If it is glib, possibly some way of exerting power over one of the parties, it is not forgiveness.

It is not good to go through a charade.

It is part of a process, which probably we will need to keep repeating, as it goes deeper and deeper inside us.

But the outcomes are not clear, so it is something to keep stepping forward into prayerfully, to keep trusting in God's Spirit to touch and change hearts.

Clearly it was Joseph who was forgiving his brothers, taking the initiative in that longed-for reconciliation; and his confidence in doing so was strengthened now, because it was so evident that God's hand was in it. God was working for good.

How liberating and healing for the whole family was his initiative? They were being set free from the guilt they had felt over all these years. Issues of jealousy and malice were being confronted by love. The barrier between them and their father was being broken down. The barrier between them and their brother was being broken down.

Everyone would be recognising they had contributed; whether in innocence and naivety, or through lack of wisdom and favouritism, or out of jealousy and malice, each had contributed to some extent to what had happened.

'Still weeping, he embraced each of his brothers and kissed them. After that, his brothers began to talk with him'

Finally, after all that, he sent them off to bring his father back to live there. Verse 24 is choice, for it says, "He sent his brothers off and as they left, he said to them, 'Don't quarrel on the way.'"

Don't you just love that!!

Was it an earnest admonition? Was it a jocular tease? Was it said wryly and dryly-expecting that they probably would anyway?

Maybe, hopefully, a profound change had occurred, in them as individuals, and between them as a family!

Joseph had offered them forgiveness, freely, definitely not because they done anything to earn it, and, in accepting it, they had all found healing. As they had been forgiven, would they now forgive other people? Had they discovered a better way of relating?

“We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

The Psalm 37, from which we read today, calls us, in simplicity of faith to trust God.

In our reading from The Sermon on the Mount, Luke 6:27-38, Jesus is very direct on how we should relate, especially with those who would be our enemies - that we should do for others what we would want them to do for us.

Here, this ancient story outlines principles and raises questions for us:

All sorts of things have happened in our lives, and are happening in our lives. Are we recognising God in them?

Are there situations which have been unresolved over a long time, which we despair of, where we need God’s help- maybe in just trusting his agenda?

Are there issues of forgiveness we are working on?

God, through Christ’s death, offers us forgiveness, definitely not because we have done anything to earn it, Are we accepting it, keeping on accepting it, and finding healing? In the way that we are forgiven, are we forgiving other people?

Is God working on our character, who we are, and are we cooperating with God, or fighting God, in this?

Wherever you are today, you can say with Joseph,

“So it was not really you who sent me here. It was God.” Genesis 37:8