Sermon for 19th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33

i

It’s easy to see why Joseph’s dream of future grandeur was enough to stick in the craw of his elder brothers. From the start, Joseph had been treated by their father as a special case. Joseph was perhaps favoured, as the Book of Genesis suggests, because he was a surprise gift in Jacob’s (Israel’s) old age; or perhaps it was that he had been born to Jacob’s first love, Rachel, rather than to Leah, Bilhah or Zilpah as ten of his eleven brothers were; or could it be because Jacob was inspired by God to do this extraordinary thing?

Normally, a father would favour the eldest son, not one of the younger ones. Was Jacob’s unusual and provocative breaking of social conventions part of God’s providential plan? If so, it worked; the brothers took great offence and decided to rid themselves of their highly favoured sibling. It was to be the beginning of their future salvation. When his brothers daubed goat’s blood on Joseph’s fancy coat, Jacob took it as proof that Joseph was dead. When Jacob received news many years later that Joseph was alive in Egypt, it was like receiving him back from the dead. Christian bells should be ringing in Christian ears as this story unfolds.

What Joseph’s brothers did was wrong. We may have some sympathy for their sense of injustice and their anger at Joseph’s lofty dreams of superiority, but they were still wrong to want to kill him (Genesis 37:18) and wrong to decide instead to sell him as a slave to a passing caravan of Midianite merchants. Yet God was able to use their sinful jealousy to their own benefit. Joseph himself later sees God’s providential hand in his fate and reassures his brothers that he bears them no ill will (Genesis 45:7-8).

Not just despite their sin, but through their sin, God was able to provide for their salvation in the years of drought. This is a very powerful story and one that forms the paradigm for many stories to come – supremely, the story of Jesus.

ii

The Israelites of Jesus’ day were also wrong to have rejected Jesus as their Messiah. They were wrong to have fabricated evidence about him and to have falsely accused him before Pilate. Judas was wrong to have betrayed his Lord, no matter what confused motive may have made him take such a despicable action.

Just as the first Israelites were sinful and wrong to have attempted to get rid of Joseph, so too these later Israelites were wrong and sinful in their treatment of Jesus. Yet God’s providential wisdom was at work in both generations to achieve his gracious plan. It is indeed, as Paul puts it in his *Letter to the Romans*, “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).

This understanding that God has been at work despite and even through the evil intent of men and women only works if Jesus truly brings victory over such sinfulness. If Jesus is just an innocent victim then evil has once again won the day. Only if Jesus has truly offered himself as a sinless offering for the sins of the world and been raised from the dead can any such claim for providence’s victory be sustained.

Who Jesus is will always be the most crucial matter of the Christian faith. The technical term for this area of theology is Christology, and with it, the closely allied subject of soteriology, or the theology of salvation. Post- theistic versions of faith leave Jesus as just another victim of this cruel and unjust world. Modern versions of Christianity without God do not give much sustenance to the hope that love conquers all. Without God, the cross is more likely to warn the world against the naivety of love and the futility of trying to bring peace without the help of a sword.

iii

In our passage from Matthew 14 we have one of the most significant statements about the nature of Christ that is to be found anywhere in the NT.

In this story, the disciples are far from land in the middle of the lake and in the fourth watch of the night – 3.00am to 6.00am: they are at their most vulnerable. They are tired from lack of sleep; they are a long way from the safety of the shore. The wind is against them. The going is tough.

Jesus then walks towards them on the water – or more precisely, on the ‘sea’ (Matthew 14:25). The sea represented to the Jewish mind the primordial chaos of Genesis 1:2; it was a symbol of the ever-threatening presence of evil. As God tamed the unruly waters of the deep in the Genesis creation story, so Jesus, his divine Son, tames them now in the presence of the disciples by walking calmly over the deep.

As is often our first instinct when faced with something new, we look for familiar experiences to understand what is happening. The disciples initially thought they had seen a ghost – not an everyday occurrence, we would all admit – but at least it was a familiar concept to them, however unusual or implausible the sighting of a ghost might be. They did not have any analogous experience of men walking on water with which to contrast this event. That is the very point of the story. Men do not walk on the sea. God alone has such power over the restless waves.

Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen (Psalm 77:19).

He [God] alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8).

Peter’s response shows that Christians are not supposed to watch in awe, but participate with Christ and share in his mighty works. When Peter says, “If it is you, Lord”, he is not doubting that it is, but is saying: “Since it is you, call me to come out onto the water.” As Wesley says in his commentary, if Peter had doubted it was Jesus he wouldn’t have got out of the boat.

Peter than loses his nerve. He sees the size of the waves. Common sense, rational instincts, self –preservation take over and he begins to take fright and sink. In calling to Jesus in his moment of doubt and terror, Peter exemplifies the behaviour of all those who seek to follow Christ.

Once again, despite Peter’s failure to walk on the sea, Jesus is still able to impart the message he intended: “Truly, you are the Son of God,” declare the disciples.

Jesus is still able to use Peter’s partial faith, his measure of courage and bring to perfection that which Peter, in his own strength, could not do. Here is another message for subsequent Christian generations: the Church does not have to be perfect to be successful. This is fortunate indeed - otherwise the Church would have folded within a generation.

This is what Wesley meant when he spoke of the indefectibility of the Church. The Church will commit errors of judgement; the Church will be plainly wrong and mistaken at times; but Christ in his love for the Church will not permit all to be lost and will use us to accomplish things which we cannot do in our own strength. In spite of our sins and ignorance, God will still use us for his glory; sometimes through our sins and wickedness God will find an opportunity to bless us and the world.

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