Sermon for 20th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:21-28

i

When famine strikes hard in Israel, Jacob and his sons are left with no other choice than to seek help from a powerful and rather intimidating neighbour, Egypt. Indeed, many countries in the region were in the same plight according Genesis 41:57.

Ten of Jacob’s sons set off to buy grain, leaving their youngest brother, Benjamin, with his father at home. Benjamin is Jacob’s new favourite. Like Joseph, he was a child of Rachel, Jacob’s first love.

When they arrived in Egypt, they failed to recognise their long-lost brother, Joseph, whom they had sold many years earlier into Midianite slavery. The brothers bow down before their brother, just as Joseph had seen in his dreams years before. But Joseph recognises them (Genesis 42:7). However, Joseph hides his identity from them, pretending he needs an interpreter.

Joseph pretends he thinks they are spies and demands that Simeon is kept as a hostage in prison while they go back and bring their youngest brother Benjamin to Egypt. Joseph also returns their silver coins to them secretly in their sacks of grain they have just bought from him. This is their test. Will they sell Simeon for their purses of silver? Will they take their money back and abandon Simeon in the Egyptian jail? Joseph wants to know if they regret what they once did to him.

Clearly, they are reformed characters; Reuben offers to take care of Benjamin and offers his own sons as guarantee to Jacob (Genesis 42:37). Judah, another brother, makes a similar offer (Genesis 43:9). So they set off for Egypt a second time with Benjamin on this occasion and with double the amount of silver to repay for what they had inadvertently taken without payment the first time. They have become trustworthy, honest men.

Joseph receives them and is very emotional at seeing his only full-blood brother Benjamin, who had also been borne by Rachel, like himself. The brothers are astonished when they find themselves seated in order of their age and that Benjamin has five times the portion of food than any other of them. Still they do not recognise Joseph.

Again, Joseph instructs that their money be hidden in their sacks of grain, but this time he adds his own silver cup into Benjamin’s sack (Genesis 44:2). Benjamin is then apprehended with the stolen cup and condemned to slavery in Egypt. Judah, who had been one of the leading conspirators against Joseph, then pleads with Joseph to take him instead of Benjamin and allow Benjamin back to his aged father. Judah and the rest are truly repentant of their past deeds (Genesis 44:33).

It is at this point in the story that our reading today takes up the narrative. Joseph can bear the subterfuge no longer. His compassion gets the better of him. His brothers have passed all the tests and so he comes out of hiding and declares himself. Generously, Joseph clears the chamber first so that the Egyptians do not have to hear of their shameful acts towards him.

Joseph does not take his revenge, as they initially fear, but forgives them and sees in his remarkable story of being sold into slavery, yet becoming Pharaoh’s equal (Genesis 44:18), God’s providence at work. “You didn’t send me here – but God did,” he declares (Genesis 45:8). Well, actually they had, and they shouldn’t have, but we know what Joseph means.

Joseph displays great forgiveness and faithfulness to his brothers. It is a powerful and dramatic story. It reveals the heart and purposes of God.

ii

There is an important symbolic aspect to Joseph’s story that we see repeated again and again throughout the Bible: through the suffering of one person, many are saved.

Joseph suffers at the hands of his brothers who sell him into slavery, depriving him of home, father, family and freedom. Yet this sinful action was used by an all-loving and all-seeing God to bring ultimate salvation not only to Joseph, but through his remarkable progress from slave to vizier, God was able to bring salvation to his sinful brothers too.

What is sometimes overlooked is the international dimension to this Jewish tale of salvation: through Joseph’s Spirit-inspired dreams to prepare for seven years of famine after seven years of plenty the Egyptians and other neighbouring countries are also saved from famine.

The sufferings of various kinds endured by Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah of Jerusalem follow a similar pattern.

There are some very narrow nationalistic passages within the OT which reflect the mood of the many times of oppression and fear that the Jewish people suffered over the years, but there are also instances of a global calling which gives a cosmic dimension to their pains. We see this particularly in the Call of Abraham in Genesis 12:3 to be a blessing to ‘all peoples of the earth’; we see it again in Isaiah of Babylon’s cry that the exiled people shall become a ‘light to the gentiles’ (Isaiah 42:6); we see it in the story of *Jonah* who tries his best to avoid being the instrument of God’s mercy to the despised citizens of Ninevah, but finds that God’s desire to save them cannot be thwarted even by running away to sea.

All these stories and others besides lay the foundation for the ultimate story of the salvation of many through the suffering of one.

iii

In our passage from Matthew 15:21-28 we see Jesus come out of hiding. He has retreated to Tyre and Sidon where he expected to go unrecognised and so gather his strength for the long journey towards Jerusalem. Yet even here the gentiles recognise him: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me,” cries the Syrophoenician woman addressing Jesus with a Messianic title.

There is much confusion about this narrative in which Jesus appears to address the woman as ‘a dog’. Here are some possible lines of interpretation.

Firstly, it could be that Jesus did not believe he should include the gentiles, but this woman persuades him by her demonstration of faith. In Matthew 10:5 the disciples were sent on their missionary journey and told not to enter gentile areas which may appear to support this view.

The evidence against this version is that Matthew includes the story of the visiting Magi from the east, thereby including the gentiles from the very beginning of the gospel. In Matthew 8, Jesus commends the centurion’s faith for surpassing anything he has witnessed in Israel; he then goes on to cure the Gadarene demoniac in the graveyard, possibly a gentile in such a gentile, pig-rearing area.

The second possible interpretation is that Jesus always envisaged a gentile mission, but simply sent his disciples first to the Jews and this episode with the Syrophoenician woman prompted him to embark upon the gentile mission. We recall Paul speaking of the gospel being the power of salvation, ‘first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile’ (Romans 1:16). Matthew 10:5 may be an instruction to go to Jewish areas **first** rather than indicating that no gentile mission was being considered at that point.

Luke has no such restriction to the mission of the Twelve to go only to Jewish settlements (Luke 9:3-6) and includes a second mission by the seventy-two which may depict a mission with gentiles specifically in mind, seventy-two being one of the traditional numbers to designate the gentile nations.

A third possibility is that Jesus is testing the disciples and expanding **their** understanding of his mission. This version argues that Jesus embraced the gentile mission from the beginning as being part of the Abrahamic covenant to bless all peoples of the earth.

Jesus remains silent to the woman’s request to see what the disciples would say. He didn’t have to wait for long. The disciples want to send the foreign woman away (v23). He then voices the usual understanding of those days – the Messiah is for the Jews – and has no interest in the rest. The zealots were already on the rise in Jesus’ day. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel”, he said.

The woman persists in faith, addressing him again as ‘Lord’. She begs for the scraps from the Jewish table, thereby reminding the Jews of their own Law of Moses that decrees that some corn should be left at the end of the fields for the poor and foreigners to gather. Thus the Jews do have some God-given responsibility for others besides themselves. This will be the foundation of the gentile mission which Paul will so enthusiastically promote in the years to follow.

In response to such faith, equal and better than much of the faith Jesus has witnessed in Israel, Jesus cures the Syrophoenician’s daughter. The disciples should watch and learn.

From Tyre and Sidon, Jesus returns to Galilee where he feeds the 4,000 (Matthew 15:29-39). This is included in Matthew as a symbol of the mission to the gentiles started by Jesus himself, a very important matter later on when Paul and others had to fight to defend such a mission.

The feeding of the 5,000 in Matthew 14:13-21 at which 12 baskets of crumbs were gathered up depicts the mission to the Jews with their five Books of Moses and their 12 tribes being fed and gathered in.

The feeding of the 4,000 at which Jesus takes the initiative to feed them, rather than the disciples as in the feeding of the 5,000, suggests this story is about the feeding of the gentiles and the ingathering of the gentiles. The baskets of crumbs this time is symbolically seven, the number denoting completion, perfection.

This interpretation is endorsed further by the strange passage we seldom read from Matthew 16:8-12. Jesus said:

Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it that you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

No wonder Jesus has just told them in Matthew 16:4 that the only sign they’ll get is the sign of Jonah, for these two groups held two ideas that flatly contradicted Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom: the Pharisees would restrict God’s interests to the Jews alone; the Sadducees refused to believe in resurrection.

Today’s story of Joseph in which God saves both Jew and gentile by the suffering of one man, in which the father receives his son back whom he thought was dead, and today’s story of the healing of the Syrophoenician’s daughter refute any narrow nationalist view of the Messiah’s role and launches the gentile mission which Paul and others were later to follow.

Stories of raising the dead will serve the purpose elsewhere to refute the yeast of the Sadducees against resurrection.

So let us beware the danger of setting our own limits to God’s love and our own limits to God’s power.

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