

7th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME C

Genesis 45: 3-11, 15

Psalms 37

1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50

Luke 6: 27-38

Fr Jordan

Jealousy and sibling rivalry, sex and politics, avarice and greed, palace intrigue. Sounds like a soap opera about the royal family. Yes it is about a royal family. These things are the ingredients of the story of Joseph and the family of Pharaoh of Egypt. I suppose they mirror human nature in every age and that is why this is one of the most popular stories of the Bible for both Jews and Christians. Joseph's story is well known. There's even been a musical written about it. Today we heard the part of the story where Joseph reveals himself to the brothers who had sold him into slavery. The brothers are not at all sure of their position, because the

brother they abused is now the most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh. As part of the story they are also accused of theft. No doubt they expect Joseph to avenge the wrong done to him so long ago. This he could do by snuffing out the life and liberty of these trembling sons of Jacob. But that is not Joseph's way. It's not his way because it's not God's way. We have to realise that Joseph is first, last and always God's man.

2

But the story's real power lies in the fact that Joseph sees God at work in his life to save people. Most immediately the people who benefit from God's grace are old Jacob and his family. However the ultimate object of God's loving intervention in Joseph's life is all humanity. Behind all the

tragedy and triumph of Joseph's life God is at work to bring good out of evil.

It is as difficult for modern people as it was for ancient people to believe that God is at work even in the dark and destructive moments of life. Many human experiences may lead us to think God's grace is not present. Some people will even go so far as to say God is never present in human suffering and defeat. The Joseph stories want to lead us to a different conclusion. These stories help us see that in spite of the awful tragedies from which God seems absent, the Ruler of the Universe is indeed present as a caring friend and will ultimately be there with us.

3

Joseph himself becomes for us the model of what the grace of God can do in human life. In this story the grace of God can transform a curse into a blessing. Joseph is himself a metaphor for God. God is the one who has every reason to reject a wayward human family but instead loves them. He loves them to the point of God's own participation in their suffering. Joseph decides he is to act as God acts. God asks us to do the same.

But that's where the difficulty arises. The difficulty is clearly pointed out in today's Gospel. How can we love our enemies? Jesus tells us this is what God is like and we should be like God. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." We know in our hearts we are unable to do this. We'd be trampled on, society wouldn't function, and unscrupulous people would get away with anything. We live in an age when

violence and power over people seems to be on the increase. Bullying is a real problem in schools and online. Harassment of various kinds seems common in the workplace.

4

Crimes occur and the penalties don't seem to fit the seriousness of the crime. Even murder seems an acceptable way of behaving to some for political ends. We know these things are wrong. We also know that in every circumstance to turn the other cheek, to love the enemy, to pray for those who abuse us is not a natural human response. Jesus came to show us a new way to be, a new way to change the world around us. So confronted with the reality of our society, and sometimes confronted with the reality of these things in our own lives, we have

to somehow to come to terms with this difficult teaching.

I do not believe God wants us to allow evil to go unchecked. I do not believe God wants his followers to participate in evil either. The followers of Jesus are not to allow selfishness, ill will or retaliation to determine their response to poor treatment or abuse. If we do let retaliation or ill will determine our response then we end up acting exactly like those who have wronged us. We need to find other ways to respond to poor treatment.

5

On many occasions in my ministry I have had to talk with people who have been abused, bullied, wronged in some way or another. The thing these people had in common was the need to tell their story in

a safe environment. They also had to deal with the anger and hurt such events cause. There is no use telling someone in this situation to love their enemy. That is sometimes imposing upon them something that is too much. Other things need to happen before any loving or forgiveness might occur. There will always be a need to name what has happened. The process of talking it through, sometimes on many occasions, is essential. The person who commits a wrong has to admit to it. Without an admission of guilt by the other party there can be no forgiveness. Only when there has been an admission of guilt can the hurt person begin to deal with the enormity of what has happened. Even if an apology is offered it can take a long time to get to the stage of offering forgiveness. Before forgiveness can occur, some sort of justice must be done.

6

In the Gospel today Jesus gives us 6 examples of when to not retaliate. Only the most literal-minded person could read these six examples without understanding that they could have been a thousand examples—or ten thousand. The principle is “Love your enemies,” and we understand almost instinctively that we must apply that principle creatively and faithfully in relationship to our enemies.

The examples which Jesus provides to illustrate the word “love” are not directed at feelings but at actions. Jesus calls us to love (Greek: *agape*), but that does not mean that we must have warm and fuzzy feelings for those who mistreat us. Instead, we are to act in ways calculated

to benefit the other person—to make that person's welfare our concern.

For forgiveness is different from reconciliation. Reconciliation requires two people and sometimes that is not possible. The other thing that is not always easy is trying to see the hand of God in this process. It's often only when one looks back that we begin to see God at work.

Going back to Joseph for a moment; he didn't offer forgiveness to his brother's indiscriminately. He first tested them to see if they had changed. Do you remember how he sent them back to their father but kept Benjamin in Egypt? He also hid money and his silver cup in their saddlebags to test their honesty. Joseph had to be sure his brothers cared for each

other. He needed to know they had changed before he would reveal himself to them.

7

Loving enemies, forgiving, doing good to those who don't do good to us, is no easy task. It takes time and effort but it is worthwhile when we are able to achieve it. It shows spiritual maturity and growth on our part that we have learnt how to forgive. It's not a process that happens quickly but we still need to expect it to happen. Thankfully God shows his mercy to us as we learn to show mercy to others. That is the heart of the Gospel.

And so, today's gospel invites us to think again about what God is like. Continually reading the stories of Jesus is a reminder of the nature of God. That helps us to

realise we have received God's love therefore we have a duty to be loving. These hard sayings of Jesus are not to be ignored. They are intended to help us become more loving and merciful people. We are encouraged to seek to be more like God and to help others see what God is like. That like Joseph's brothers all people may know mercy, and so show mercy to others. To the Glory of God. Amen.