

Sermon Archive 163

Sunday 20 August 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Genesis 45: 1-15
Psalm 133

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A couple of years ago a friend of mine featured in one of my sermons. I spoke of his having taken a year off his university studies to work as a volunteer teacher in a Catholic school in Papua New Guinea. I described the administrative blunder that took the physically unfit micro-biologist into teaching in a department of Phys Ed. I also related how, on his return to New Zealand, he'd been killed in a car crash just south of Dunedin. He died 26 years ago, and when I think of him I still miss him.

-ooOoo-

Here's another story about Derek. Before he set off for New Guinea, he asked if I'd be interested in joining him on a tour around Northland, while he caught up with some of his family. Derek came from a big family; by memory he was the youngest of seven. When he'd been very young his father died of heart disease, and his mother of cancer. His eldest brother took over the parenting. Derek turned out reasonably well, so it would seem his brother did a good job - perhaps an even better one than his parents had done - although it might not be fair for me to say that. What I do know about his parents is that when Derek was very young, still at the stage of forming gently remembered childhood memories, his parents reached an impasse with their daughter - Derek's much older sister. It was over a boyfriend. They'd presented an ultimatum: "So long as you live in this house, you're not to see that boy".

Patricia chose the boy over the house. She was sixteen when she left home. Because she'd left under circumstances of proud, closing doors, "not speaking" was part of the deal. No effort from either side went into keeping in touch.

Now Derek was 21, and doing his family farewell tour. Planning appointments with his brothers, his thoughts went to his sister. These days we have social media - making it quite easy to track people down. But this was 1988. The

internet didn't exist. Finding people involved cumbersome processes like searching electoral rolls, writing and posting cheques to the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. No simple task! Nevertheless, research revealed that someone who could have been Derek's sister had no fixed address - because she lived not in a house but on a boat. According to port records, the boat was currently moored just off Opuia, in the Bay of Islands.

So it was that Derek and I, two veritable landlubbers, rented a dinghy. When, by God's grace rather than by any rowing skills, we pulled up next to the boat, Derek called out "hello". A woman came up from the cabin below and greeted us. "Are you Patricia" asked Derek. "Yes" she answered. Derek said "I'm Derek, your little brother".

We were invited on board. She made us a cup of tea. The conversation was unspectacular, but wonderful. I felt privileged to have witnessed it. I say, with the psalmist, "how good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

Joseph's family was broken. Maybe part of the reason was mis-parenting by Jacob. Everything we read of his parenting shows unequal treatment of his children - fostering resentment between them. Special favours for Joseph, nothing for the others. Special noting of Joseph's talents, not a word for the others. When the eleven brothers, in huge resentment, turn on Joseph, it's not a deed of Jacob - but Jacob's created the petri dish in which resentment has grown. Not directly responsible for what happens to Joseph, Jacob still shares responsibility - as maybe does Joseph for being precocious and tactless. But maybe now I've just blamed the victim. As soon as you start trying to apportion blame, it's easy to say offensive things.

Avoiding the saying of offensive things, then, here are some recorded facts. Eleven brothers have a conversation about hatred for Joseph. One day while away from home, violent speech and thinking turns into violent action. They attack Joseph and sell him to slave traders. They fake his death to deceive their father - otherwise he might go out looking for his missing son. Sold to a wealthy business man in Egypt, Joseph is repeatedly sexually harassed and eventually sexually assaulted by his employer's wife - she who has all the power. When blame for *her* actions falls upon *him*, the innocent man is thrown in jail. At this lowest point of his life story, can you imagine Joseph harbouring dark thoughts and deep resentments? He's quite the victim of many who are to blame.

Eventually, through some chance meetings and random connections (do we believe in them?), Joseph finds himself serving the king of Egypt. Taking charge of Egypt's food reserves, he becomes immensely powerful. Whoever has food, has life. Whoever has no food, faces death. So, in any time of food shortage, Joseph decides who lives and who dies. Anyone against whom Joseph might harbour blame would come out of this situation very badly.

Joseph's "coming into power" is happening far away from his old home. He's doing all his public work under his Egyptian name - Zaphenath-paneah, so there's no news about Joseph going to the family to which he once belonged. He's probably fading from their memory - although even after 26 years some of us still remember those who have gone, and I imagine Jacob always remembered. Equally, I suspect that among eleven brothers there would have been the occasional feeling of guilt. What have we done? It is our fault. We are to blame.

Or maybe to this day they continue to blame Joseph: "he shouldn't have been so arrogant. He brought it on himself". And if you fill your field with a big crop of hatred, maybe there's not a lot of room for guilt to grow. It's all speculation. But whether it's hatred (blame going **that** way) or guilt (blame coming **this** way), it's still totally the blame game.

The game's being played in Egypt too. When Joseph becomes a father, he gives his firstborn child the name Manasseh - which means "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house". Although you might argue that that's an expression of "letting go", "forgetting the past", it looks more to me like the enshrining in the next generation's conversation of an old family feud - a brand new child named after a wrong of the past. He calls his second son Ephraim, which translates "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes." Again, although he's acknowledging his blessing, he's cementing in his family narrative the vocab of misfortune. This man is nurturing a hurt - continuing to blame his family - who are indeed entirely worthy of blame.

When first he meets them again, he has the advantage of knowing who they are, while they don't recognise him. His first action is to retain his anonymity - to speak to them as if they're strangers - (knowledge is power). His second action is to accuse them of spying. His third is to plant stolen property in their luggage. He still blames them for what they did. And as I said, anyone against whom Joseph might hold blame is going to come out of this very

badly indeed. The power over life and death is precarious in the balance.

Today's reading picks up just at **that** point of absolute tension. And under that tension, something's about to snap. What snaps is Joseph's composure. He suddenly bursts into tears. He says "I am Joseph, your brother; is my father still alive?" Utterances during tears often indicate what's at the heart of the matter. And what's at the heart of this matter is that Joseph asks after his father - the one who loved him. Amid wealth, power and fame, he just misses his father. (The tragedy of the missing figure – the tragedy of broken community). Is the weight of that missing, the weight of caring about the fellow victim of the wrong, what breaks the blame game? Joseph's concern for the missing father does seem to be a big part of what happens.

Also part of what happens is that Joseph finds a new way of understanding what's happened to him. He's able to reframe his life story. He says to his brothers, I didn't end up here because of your evil. I ended up here because of God's wisdom. All these years I've seen you as the authors of my life - but the real author is the forward thinking God who provides. He says to his brothers "don't be distressed; it wasn't really your fault".

That's rubbish, of course. It **was** their fault. But the interesting thing is that he no longer needs to blame them for it. Caving into a longing for the missing person, the reframing of his family story within the larger story of God enables the blaming to stop. Central to breaking long-standing cycles of blame is the placing our story within the story of God - (dying, rising, coming again in peace) - finding a new narrative to wrap around our life, that we might reframe our lives, forgive and be free. Please God, call us to meditate on the gospel of Jesus.

-ooOoo-

Pathetic rowers Derek and Matthew row out to reconnect with a long-estranged sister. In the past there is the sorrow of the absent parents, the weight of past mistakes, weariness in the blame game. "I am Derek, your brother". "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." We re-tell the story. We wrap ourselves in God. We let go of the blame.

A moment of quiet.

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