

Sixth Sunday after Trinity 2019 Evensong

(28.07.19)

Genesis 42: 1 – 25; 1 Corinthians 10: 1 – 24

What a couple of long Bible passages we've had this evening! 25 verses in the Old Testament lesson and 24 in the New. And yet, for all its length, the Old Testament lesson gets us nowhere. It certainly doesn't progress the narrative of the Joseph story that I guess all of us know, if only from the musical rather than from hours spent pouring over the Scriptures. In fact far from progressing it, the passage we've heard only serves to retard the action and heighten the suspense. At the end, instead of hearing Maxine say "Here ends the first lesson" I was half expecting to hear the organ strike up "Da, ta-da, dah, darrh!"

But it's not just the narrative that's left unresolved. The characters, also, remain psychologically trapped in the past. The brothers carry the burden of their guilt around with them. And when they come up against a

problem with this prime minister of Egypt, they immediately – and without any particular logic – think it's karma, it's God's quid pro quo, for what they did to their brother all those years ago. They've been living for all those years, waiting for their past to catch up with them, and now they're convinced that it has.

And Joseph: we've previously seen him as a naïve, impressionable young man and as an astute and sage administrator; but now we see him consumed by bitterness and resentment, exploiting his power in order to manipulate and intimidate his brothers.

Of course, there's comedy in it. We all know that Joseph knows what they're saying, so there's a laugh on the brothers. We all know, because we've seen the musical, that there's going to be a happy ending: before we get much more than a couple of chapters further on they're all going to be reconciled and Jason Donovan is going to burst on to the stage singing "May I return, to the beginning? Ah-ha-haa."

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But if we take this passage at face value it is a miserable commentary on the human condition. And that, for me, is the glory of the Old Testament! It takes the human condition absolutely seriously and gives us complex, fully rounded three dimensional, deeply flawed characters. We see God's grace being poured out through failed characters in a way we've probably got to go to the novels of Graham Greene to find elsewhere.

Now I think it would probably be unfair to try to set up a simplistic contrast here between the Old and the New Testaments. The New Testament is, of course, full of flawed characters. St Peter is a crass, blustering oaf; and all the other male disciples with him deserted Jesus when push came to shove. Last week, we were considering whether, instead of demythologising Mary Magdalene, we ought to be celebrating her as a tart with a heart. And St Paul himself, of course, was a ruthless enforcer of persecution against the early church.

But in all these characters there is a fairly dualistic idea of before and after: they were sinners, but they went on to be saints. And if a criticism is to be levelled at Paul's letters, it might be that there is this simplistic duality: *not* to be in Christ means to be enslaved to the law, or to immorality, or to base features of human nature; whereas to *be* in Christ is to live somehow in a rarefied spiritual state. I remember as a teenager being convinced that this is what I was reading; and being somewhat bewildered by finding that the reality I experienced didn't correspond with my earnest – and I mean painfully earnest – expectations of being a Christian.

But such a criticism of Paul's letters does no justice to a passage such as this evening's from 1 Corinthians - or indeed to the man himself who spoke of finding himself doing the opposite of what he wanted to do. 1 Corinthians 10 is absolutely candid that the Christian life is a struggle. He does, of course, offer the rather trite assurance that God will not test you beyond your

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strength, and in the course of my pastoral ministry I've met one or two who would question the veracity of such a platitude. But nevertheless he makes it plain that we need to watch out that we do not fall. And Paul's answer is not about choosing whether to be a goodie or a baddie; he doesn't issue an injunction listing all the bad things we must try not to do, as if Christianity is about telling people how to behave. What Paul does is encourage us to participate in the sacramental life of the church, using words that we have incorporated into our liturgy: because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

All too often we hear the criticism that Christians want to tell people how to behave. And all too often Christians *do* go around telling people how to behave. But at the heart of scripture, Old Testament and New, is a candid acceptance of the reality and the complexity of the human condition and an invitation to participate in God's grace nonetheless. Any impact

on human behaviour is purely incidental . . . or miraculously providential.

Amen.