

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

6th August 2017

Sibling Stories (Genesis 45:1-15)

Spirit... may you be the force that seeks us out... celebrating who we are... and calling each a gift to the other... May you be the word that inspires... the voice that welcomes... the community that is open... and the space for all...

St Andrews last week... while we were on holiday... chose that week... to rain... Well... not just that week... the whole summer... It's drier on the east we were encouraged by many the week before we went... It wasn't... Or if it was... it must have been pretty bad here...

However given news of the 4 hour queues at airports where the sun is shining this year... we had enjoyed half our holiday... by the time some had only got to passport control in Palma!...

The dualism of those who live inside the Schengen area... and those of us who are outside... those inside have quick access... those outside... queue...

Thankfully... there didn't seem to be any problem of delays for those attending the Paschendaele commemorations... where there were no outsiders and insiders... no dualism... Belgian, British, German, Canadian and so many others... found they were all travelling together... as we commemorated the events of those terrible battles... and together we found the moment... where we heard the experience of Paschendaele from the position of the other... where we heard words from soldiers on every side... from the experience of not just British but German and Belgium and Canadian... every nation... This was perhaps the underplayed... yet defining and singularly hopeful moment of the whole event... as they talked of hell and horror... still multiplied too many times today...

The commemorations were very moving... and incredibly well done... dignified... made poetry out of the horror... especially at the cemetery on the Monday... It didn't feel like there were 'them and us'... and given we have created such a 'them and us' world... when we have moments like Monday... when the ground is levelled... why can't we learn... and let that inspire and define us...

There will be many more commemorations over the coming year of the ending of the First World War... That gives us a chance... to add another much older story... or a series of stories... to help us respond to this 'them and us' world... the war was meant to change...

It is the story of Joseph and his brothers... and the story before that of Jacob and Esau... and the one before that of Isaac and Ishmael... and before that of Cain and Abel...

What these four stories have in common is that they are all about sibling rivalry... and each is as dysfunctional as the next... The Bible has no idealised family... You wouldn't want to be mixed up in any of them... The Bible is wiser... and in such stories finds a way to faith in the reality of our humanity... by preserving its truth in its complex and subtle stories of siblings...

Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks... is clearly to 'go to' person to explore these texts... who has lived with these stories all of his life... and he offers us a way of reading them that might begin this step towards living differently towards each other...

When you read the stories of these sibling rivalries... read how they finish... With Cain and Abel... Abel ends up murdered... with Isaac and Ishmael... they end up not speaking much... at their father, Abraham's grave... With Jacob and Esau... they briefly come together and then go their separate ways... and with Joseph and his brothers... there is finally forgiveness and reconciliation...

But when you tell them... who is it you identify with in each of them... Initially you identify with Cain... because his offering of grain was rejected... then Abel when he is murdered...

Isaac and Ishmael... it is Ishmael... left in the desert to die with his mother inconsolably crying from a distance...

Jacob and Esau... we sympathise with Esau... cheated out of his birthright...

And Joseph and his brothers... with Joseph... almost killed... sold into slavery... In each of the stories... we sympathise with the 'them'... not 'us'... but 'them... the other... The Bible always subtly manages to lead us to sympathise with the other... never allowing us to demonise the other... but sympathise with them... The sibling rivalries in the bible are not the only places that happens... look at Jonah... the bible even gets you to sympathise with those who are out with Israel... because the Bible says something remarkable... that both 'them and us' are loved by God... and when we are the 'us'... and we have to see the 'them' in that way... the ground shifts...

Not just in politics... but in faith... we have built rules about those who are in and those who are out... we know who are saints and we know who are sinners... but as soon as you divide people into the saved and the damned... you have taken the first step on the road to violence in God's name...

The Bible does not allow us to do that... The Bible forces us to understand... for God to love me... God doesn't have to hate you... For God to choose me... God doesn't have to reject you... Look at the progress in these sibling stories... We start with the cold blooded retaliation of Cain and Abel... but evolve to the mature response of Joseph towards his brothers...

In Joseph's story... you could read it as Joseph taking revenge on his brothers... sending them back... imprisoning some... so that they know what he suffered... but... at every stage... Joseph turns aside and weeps... This is not revenge... At a very superficial level... it might be... as in the ears of a child... but this is imagining the experience of someone who is your rival or enemy...

Joseph... reimagining his own experience of being sold and imprisoned... and imagining what that prospect must now feel like for his brothers... the experience of being in the shoes of the other... Joseph chooses what to do... and on the strength of that it leads to reconciliation... not retaliation...

The Bible constantly pushes us to experience these stories from the point of view of the victim... the stranger... the other... and subtly forces us to empathise with the other... It is a clever and subtle book...

Given that these stories are the shared culturally with Jew, Christian and Muslim... if we were to read them together... and each find ourselves in these different perspectives... then you realise the 'others' welfare... is linked to our own... 'them' and 'us' keeps changing sides... They stories are an attempt to cure the strain and tension between us all... because we are all children of Abraham...

These are highly complex and subtle stories... These sibling rivalries move us from the pain of Cain and Abel... to the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers... when... through the experience of these tales... you hear the story from the perspective of the other... That's what the Bible does to us... moves us from being the powerful 'us'... to hearing the story from the place of 'them'... the powerless... the victim... the stranger...

And perhaps... perhaps... if that was how we read our national story today... as we did a little on Monday at Paschendaele... hearing our culture's story... from the perspective of the 'other'... the victim... the stranger... we might begin to relate to each other differently...

It will never be an easy conversation... Joseph clearly didn't find it so... but it is a faithful conversation for a faith that doesn't define itself by a set of truths... but as a way of being in the world... and how we live towards each other in the world... It is all about the relationships we have... being in the place of the other... the stranger... the victim... and dreaming a world from that perspective... then Paschendaele might yet be our hope for peace... and for all of us who divide the world into them and us... with the conflict that must result...

The dysfunctional siblings of the Bible... puts us in the shoes of the 'others'... it is where the bible places us... It is on level ground... and it is our hope...

References

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