

Sermon

Sunday 13 August, 2017

Lessons

Genesis 37: 1 – 4, 12 – 28

St Matthew 14: 22 - 33

We could not ask for stories more dramatic and imaginative than the selling of Joseph by his brothers into slavery and Jesus, in the midst of a storm, walking on water. This is the Bible at its best. In our first story, that of Jacob and his twelve sons, we hear of a father's favouritism and the jealousy and hatred of siblings. There is something very human about the Jacob story. Parents still make the mistake of favouring one child over another and, tragically, sibling rivalry can end in injury and death.

In the Old Testament story, Jacob favoured his son Joseph and gifted him - him alone - a robe with long sleeves. Sometimes translated as a robe of many colours, it was a rich robe with long sleeves. Those long sleeves meant that Joseph was exempt from work; the brothers had to toil and sweat but not Joseph. When the brothers got their chance, they seized Joseph. Initially with the intention of murder, in the end, they sold him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. He was taken to Egypt. We are reading faith narrative. This is a genre of writing intended for spiritual reflection and meditation. What is

most striking in this entire episode, apart from the crime itself, is that Joseph never speaks: there is no dialogue between the brothers and Joseph. The dreamer is silent.

In our second story, that of Jesus walking on water, we hear of waves, a strong wind, a boat being battered and, strangely, we hear not only that Jesus walked on water but so too did Peter. The background to the story of Jesus walking on water is the brutal murder of his cousin, John the Baptist, and also the feeding of the 5000. When Jesus was told of the beheading of the Baptist, He withdrew, got into a boat and sought the seclusion of a deserted place. The tetrarch, the ruler of Judaea, Herod, had held a great party to celebrate his birthday. Amidst the celebrations and high spirits, Herod's wife, Herodias, demanded that the head of the prophet be brought to her on a platter. John was murdered. Jesus withdrew when He heard this news.

However, the crowd followed Him; many came for healing. Taking five loaves and two fish, He fed thousands of people. Finally, when evening came, He made His disciples get into a boat and set off across the lake while He went up a mountain by Himself to pray. He was

there alone. While He prayed, a storm blew up over the water; the wind was strong and the boat was tossed around by the waves.

What is most striking in this episode is the contrast between the power of the wind and the waves, the chaos and the danger with the peace, calm and stillness of Jesus in prayer. If we pause for a moment, gaze into the story, see Jesus with the inner eye, with the heart, we too may feel His peace, calm and stillness in the storm.

In the ancient world, only God or the gods could walk on water. In Greek mythology, Orion, the son of Poseidon, the sea-god, was able to walk on water. In Judaism, in the Book of Job and in Psalm 77, God makes His way through water. In the inter-testamental writing, the Book of Sirach, the Wisdom of God walks on the water. In the Old Testament, in Hebrew, we read of the Wisdom of God. In the New Testament, in Greek, we read of the Word of God. The Wisdom or Word of God walks on water. Scripture is not to be read literally; we must engage with it imaginatively, emotionally and spiritually.

I said that Joseph was silent. Through his seizure, imprisonment and sale into slavery, Joseph did not speak. Years later, when the tables are turned and his brothers travel to Egypt for help, for food to save

their life, Joseph tells them not to be afraid or distressed. Looking back, Joseph saw God in his troubles, in the twists and turns of his life, even in his darkest moments, in the betrayal by his brothers. On one level, Joseph saw God right at the very centre of his life, including those memories which brought him tears. On another level, the silence of Joseph may hide a breakdown, the shattering of his ego: he was not the golden boy he and his father thought him to be.

Everything Joseph had was taken from him: he became a slave; he was nothing. The pit from which he emerged may have been more than a deep hole in the ground; it may have been a resurrection, a leaving behind of the small, selfish self into a larger, more beautiful humane human being. Joseph saw God in his darkness.

Over the past four years I have benefited greatly from studying the work of the blind preacher and mystic, George Matheson. In his hymn *O Love that wilt not let me go*, in the third verse we sing the line, 'I trace the rainbow through the rain'. Those are not Matheson's original words: a change was forced on him by the editor of *Life & Work*. Matheson's original version is, 'I climb the rainbow in the rain.' The change may seem subtle but it is a world apart. If we trace the rainbow through the rain, we do so with our fingertip and

from a distance. There is separateness. However, if we climb the rainbow in the rain, we hold on to the rainbow with our whole body, our whole weight. If we climb a rainbow, we do so using our hands as well as our feet. The rainbow is a sign of God's love, mercy and faithfulness. Matheson said that the rainbow sustained him in the rain; in the rain, in the darkness and suffering of his life, he saw and felt the presence of God with his whole being.

In his reflection on this passage, Matheson is moved by the loneliness of Jesus. Jesus is alone on the water. With the inner eye, like Peter, Matheson got out of the boat to be with Jesus. Later, in meditation, Matheson joined Christ at the Cross; a companion in Christ's loneliness. Matheson said that it was the storm which taught Peter and the disciples their need of God. It is only when Peter was sinking that he called out, 'Lord, save me!' So often in life, it is only when our ego is broken, when the circumstances of life are more than we can bear, when we start to sink, that we discover in a way never experienced before our helplessness and our need of the Divine. We cannot say that God sends us our distress and suffering but that, for many of us, it is only when we are in the darkness that we truly turn to the Eternal. It is when this world can no longer satisfy our needs,

when we see through the shallowness of this world, that we seek something deeper, more profound.

In the early centuries the Church was shaped by stories of immense faith in the face of fearful adversity. In 155AD, Polycarp, the 86 year old bishop of Smyrna, was called before the proconsul to deny his faith in Christ. The bishop was told, 'Curse Christ.' Polycarp refused. The proconsul said, 'I have wild beasts. If you don't repent, I will have you thrown to them.' Polycarp replied, 'Send for them!' In the end, Polycarp was burned to death. As he faced death, the bishop said, 'In all my life, Christ has done me no wrong and I shall not deny Him now.'

In our time, in this country, the greatest challenge Christians face is materialism: the worldview that there is only the world of matter. Prominent scientists tell us that the universe has no purpose, no meaning. Recently, I read a number of articles written by cosmologists about dark matter and dark energy. It struck me that, on the one hand, the knowledge they were sharing was fascinating and mind-blowing but, on the other hand, it seems to me they know very little about the universe. Humanity knows so little about the

nature of the universe. The Church must not be dazzled by science or cowed by 'priests' wearing goggles and white coats. Against the seeming meaningless of life, in the face of terrible suffering, at its best, the Church has a rock which is unmoved by the storms. At its best, in the seeming meaninglessness of life, the Church brings meaning, relationship with the Divine, union with the Eternal, intimacy with the Sacred.

In one of his reflections Matheson expressed sympathy for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He said it was inoculation, Christ abiding in us, flesh of His flesh. We become one. While not endorsing the doctrine of transubstantiation, the centrality of the Mass in the Roman Catholic tradition nurtured Matheson's craving for the spiritual, for union with the Holy. Calvin too sought the Sacrament each week, desiring the nourishment which only the bread and wine can give.

Joseph saw God in his silence, his suffering and his darkness; in the troubles of his life. The faith narrative of Jesus walking on water, of Peter sinking, is a story of finding Jesus, the peace, calm and stillness

of Jesus in our troubles. Stand on the water with Him. Faith, prayer and meditation are about gazing into these stories.

Amen.