

2019-07-28 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price
Genesis 42: 1 – 25; 1 Corinthians 10: 1 - 24

The compilers of the Lectionary who choose our readings at Evensong certainly gave us our money's worth tonight, 25 verses in the first lesson and 24 verses in the second lesson. The readings almost began to encroach on eternity in their length. I cannot see any obvious link between the messages for us of the two lessons, but perhaps you can and will inform me afterwards.

The first lesson (Genesis, chapter 42, verses 1 to 25) is part of the long story of Joseph, 13 chapters of the book of Genesis, over a quarter of the book. The story of Joseph is quite different from the stories of the other early figures in the Old Testament. It has a clearly conceived plot and the characters in the story are well-pictured. It's almost like a novel. Indeed one clerical friend of mine once told that after he'd started reading it he had to read to the end to find out what happened. Since he was approaching retirement from the ministry I did wonder why the story seemed so new to him.

Joseph is the hero, and a really idealised hero. Indeed we know more about him than about any other Old Testament figure except perhaps King David. Joseph is the model son – his parents were Jacob and Rachel. He was the perfect servant and the ideal administrator, of exemplary character and self-assurance. And, above all, he had an unshakeable faith in God, which enabled him to overcome all sorts of difficulties and challenges.

So the story so far: Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, jealous that he was their father's favourite son. In Egypt he was put into prison by the wife of his owner after she had tried unsuccessfully to seduce him. In prison he interpreted the dreams of the King's butler and baker, and as a result he was asked to interpret the dreams of the King, or Pharaoh. (In passing, it would be interesting to see how often dreams occur in the Bible.) In the end, as a result of his interpreting of the royal dreams about seven years of plenty being followed by seven years of famine, Joseph became virtual ruler of Egypt, next only to Pharaoh. Joseph's faith in his skill, given to him by God, in interpreting dreams was impressive, although I wonder whether he ever worried slightly as the years went on about the accuracy of his predictions..

But, just as he had predicted, seven years of plenty were followed by seven years of famine, but the people of Egypt survived the famine because food had been stored in vast warehouses for their consumption during the famine. Back at Joseph's home in Canaan, however, there was also a famine and ultimately his brothers were forced to go to Egypt to find food. What happened to them in Egypt we heard in the first lesson this evening. They met Joseph but they did not recognise him, although he recognised them. Joseph wanted to see his younger brother, Benjamin, who had not been in the group which went down to Egypt. Joseph ordered another brother, Simeon, to be kept in Egypt as a hostage until the brothers returned to Egypt with Benjamin. On their second visit, this time with Benjamin, Joseph eventually revealed his identity to his brothers, and ultimately his father, Jacob, joined the family in Egypt, where Pharaoh gave them the best part of Egypt for their new home. It was a happy ending. **PTO**

It's a splendid narrative, and the author had a good grasp of Egyptian customs and practices, such as the fact that the Egyptians did not eat at the same table as non-Egyptians and that the Egyptians embalmed bodies for 40 days. One little detail which has always appealed to me is the reference to Joseph having to shave when he was released from prison to go to Pharaoh. The lesson of the story seems to be trusting in God's providence. The brothers thought that Joseph might take revenge on them for selling him into slavery, but Joseph saw the greater picture when he declared that if he had not been sold into slavery the family would have died because of the famine in their home country: **'[My brothers], you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today'**. It was all God's doing. Perhaps we can conclude that ultimately however wicked actions might appear, like the brothers selling Joseph into slavery, in the end God can make good come out of evil.

And of course since the key event in the history of the Jewish people was their freedom from slavery in Egypt, under the leadership of Moses, so the history of how they reached Egypt in the first place was an important story to be remembered.

I wish that it was as easy to sum up the meaning and the message of **the second lesson (1 Corinthians, chapter 10, verses 1 to 24)** this evening. It might well have confused you, not least the reference to the Israelites in the desert drinking supernatural drink from the supernatural Rock which was Christ. It's a reading which, I think, ought to be looked at in a discussion group, verse by verse, rather than simply read in a service. It's basically about the worship of idols. The Israelites in the desert on their way from Egypt turned to the worship of idols and to immorality. We need to learn from their mistakes and avoid repeating them. We need to forget about self-confidence and cultivate God-confidence. As one paraphrase put it: ***'So, my very dear friends, when you see people reducing God to something they can use or control, get out of their company as fast as you can'***. St Paul stresses that to show even the semblance of reverence to pagan gods, which is idolatry, is to be false to Jesus and to encourage the powers of darkness, of demons. Here St Paul makes it clear that, as one writer put it, 'You can't have it both ways, banqueting with the Master one day and slumming with demons the next. Besides, the Master won't put up with it. He wants us all or nothing. Do you think you can get off with anything less?'. You can't be a Christian and a pagan. St Paul sums up the whole question by saying that our neighbour's good must be our guidance, as shown by the final words of the lesson tonight: ***'Let no one seek his or her own good, but the good of his or her neighbour'*** or *'We want to live well, but our foremost efforts should be to help others live well'*.

Thus the first lesson shows us that God can make good come out of evil, something which might help us when we are confused by the ups and downs of life. And the second lesson tells us that we should seek the good of others before our own good, which should be at the heart of our conduct as Christians, following the example of Jesus himself.