

2023-08-20 ... 10am Worship Service Sermon ... Revd Jane Stephenson

Genesis 45: 1 – 15; Romans 11: 1 -2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: 21 – 28

A man was coming out of a church one day, the Minister at the door grasped his hand firmly and held on to it. "Friend" said the Minister, "you need to join the army of the Lord." The man hesitated slightly, but was still held in an iron grip, so he said: "I'm already in the army of the Lord." This time the Minister dropped his voice and whispered: "so how come we hardly ever see you here?" The man whispered: "I'm in the Secret Service."

I'm not sure that, despite, in past decades, the rousing nature of old hymns like "Onward Christian Soldiers" or being stirred by the sight and sound of a Salvation Army Band, we need to declare ourselves an army and I'm certain that we don't want to be members of a Secret Service ... (joking apart) armies and secret services tend to raise spectres of oppressive regimes, the application of laws created by the few to control the many, and the exclusion of all those who don't fit the declared 'norm.'

No, we're not an exclusive army or agents of a secret service group, but hopefully our faith leads us to be an inclusive congregation of believers in Christ, where constituency is not confined simply to this building, nor to this society, but is universal and reflects the all-embracing love and mercy of God.

Our Bible readings this morning help us to explore the tension between a purity and exclusivity that some would say is the only way to find God, and a wider more inclusive acceptance of outsiders, which others would say is the true manifestation of God's mercy. The "all-powerful" God surely does not need our feeble rule-making, our efforts to control and confine access to him – he does not need our protection – we need his – and by 'we' I mean 'everyone.'

So how do we see this tension in the Bible. It begins perhaps with the creation of God's people, with God's covenant with Abraham to protect his people, to make a Holy People who are his own ... the Chosen People of Israel (the Jewish people) who should know God intimately and the outsiders, the Gentiles, who might threaten this intimacy ...

... **The Old Testament reading** is part of the long story of Joseph – a descendant of Abraham – enslaved by the trickery of his brothers into an alien world in Egypt ... it pre-dates by centuries the first enslavement of the Israelites, the Exodus with Moses, the settlement in Israel with Joshua, the forming of Israel itself. This part of the story should be one of exclusion, of revenge, but it contains forgiveness and mercy (albeit with a little trickery on Joseph's part). Joseph, once a slave, once an alien, is now the highest official in Egypt – he has prepared Egypt for famine – and it seems he welcomes needy migrants from outside and with some goodness of heart tries to feed them.

It is by accident he encounters his brothers on this begging mission and it is no surprise that they are terrified when they discover his real identity. They expect only retribution – exclusion for their past wickedness, but Joseph offers forgiveness and hope. The story is longer and more complex than this, but Joseph acts to bring them in to the fold, to send for his Father and to honour his family. His audience with them and the emotional response is secret, but his invitation and offer of comfort are open and real. Joseph's actions reveal the depth of his relationship with God, his understanding of the love and mercy that is God's gift but which is extended through Joseph himself. If Joseph had excluded his brothers, he would have excluded Israel itself. ***"God sent me before you to preserve life."*** **PTO**

Our Epistle from Paul to the Romans is written by a man whose righteous certainty had been a major cause of the persecution of Jesus' early Jewish followers. Exclusion was the theme and murder and imprisonment were the methods.. Paul however was struck down, literally blinded on the road to Damascus so that his heart and mind could be opened. By the time he is writing this letter, still devout, he is now extending God's word through the Good News of Christ into the Gentile communities. Has he rejected Israel by this wider mission? "No" says Paul. How could he be faithless? The wideness and power of God's love however are to come from the example of Judaism to the outsiders, who will no longer be excluded. All people are disobedient to God, but each group can teach the other **how** to receive God's mercy. Secrecy and exclusion are not the way of Christ.

And thus in the Gospel passage we find the same tensions ... include or exclude ... time is limited ... Jesus' priority has to be the saving of Israel ... of God's Chosen People ... the task must be, at times, overwhelming. And so we have this somewhat harsh account of his meeting with a Gentile woman when he is resting from recently antagonistic encounters in his home area, by visiting the 'pagan' region of Tyre and Sidon (incidentally the district in which the long-destroyed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were once dominant). The woman calls to him to save her daughter who is demon-possessed. She calls him "Son of David" and "Lord" ... a compliment in Judaism, a sign of his identity, but she is **not** Jewish, she is Gentile ... perhaps he is angered by her interruption, realising that he has no peace, even here. He ignores her. His own "army" the disciples try to get rid of her – she persists. Jesus does basically insult her ... he does use the term "dogs" (which was used for Gentiles) and says he cannot feed the pet-dog. And how clever is her response and how brave ... **even the dogs eat crumbs from the table** ... at that moment her determination, her faith, her understanding of God's will brings Jesus up short – brings his Father's world into sharp focus. He praises her faith and by word alone heals her daughter. She has shown him that it is true **faith** that allows God's mercy to enter the world. This story appears in Mark and in Matthew – it is not hidden – Jesus' change of heart is very clear and the move from exclusion to inclusion is immensely powerful, not only for the mother of the child, but for the future understanding of real faith. The Good News certainly belongs to the Jews, but it belongs also to the outsiders.

And so our Good News belongs with us but it cannot and must not be confused by secrecy, by exclusive rules and laws, by becoming a protective army. We do of course need our quiet times, we can share bread with Christ in a personal moment of encounter this morning, but we are also empowered by our faith to step out from here and carry our joy in his presence into our daily lives – Christ's love makes a difference to how we live our lives and to who we are. We are **not** a Secret Service – we are a congregation of Christ whose mercy allows us to be living and active in the world.

Amen.