

Genesis 42 4-end, 1 Corinthians 14 1-19

Sometimes I think the evensong readings leave the commentator in a state of perplexity! This commentator at least!

Whilst the passage from Corinthians has some sound observations about the approach to a service of worship they are all wrapped around the use or not of the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. It's an area I don't have much experience of and certainly can't be enlightening about so I hope you will excuse me if I don't tackle it this evening.

If the passage has raised burning questions in your mind, I'm happy to have a conversation about it, as I know would Chris or Pippa – so do raise them – I have explored the area in the past because it is, or has been at least, a hot topic between Christian denominations, and I had a lot of questions – questions, particularly faith questions, should always be explored in my opinion!

So that leaves me with our Old Testament passage – and I can't see any link between it and the New Testament passage – which perhaps in this instance is a good thing!

It's the very end of the book of Genesis, the end of the stories of Jacob and Joseph – though not of course of their people. For those of the Jewish faith, there are roots here that our Christian ears do not pick up on. For instance, verse 10 they held there a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed a time of mourning for his father for seven days is the source of the tradition of 'shiv'ah', the seven days of most intense mourning incumbent upon Jews who have lost close kin.

Also for those who know the whole story more intimately than we do, there is a pattern of God's promises being met – a few chapters before when Jacob agreed to travel with his family to live in Egypt, God promised him that God would go down with him to Egypt and would also bring him back, and that Joseph's hand would close his eyes.

Perhaps for us as Christians the bit that stands out is the bit about forgiveness. I notice that Joseph's brothers find it difficult to accept forgiveness, to believe that they are forgiven. I think this is universal.

This large family of brothers are afflicted by the way that their internal power struggles have played out. Their poor relationship with Joseph, their father's blue-eyed boy, and perhaps an obnoxious little whist as a result, leads them to terrible behaviour that has haunted them ever since. We saw in last week's story that not all the brothers were agreed on that course of action which must have led to additional tensions and they have all borne their father's sadness.

Joseph, from his position of power, is able to do some pretty mean things in the guise of teaching his brothers a lesson. Although he eventually provides them with a place of safety to live and a plentiful supply of food it doesn't seem as if he empowers them in any way. With Jacob dead and buried, they are scared about what next.

Forgiveness means no grudge, no debt. As I've pondered this, I think that someone who forgives must need to repeatedly demonstrate to the one who is forgiven that this is the case, without any belittlement. I don't suppose it makes it much easier to accept that one is forgiven and just adds to the ways in which forgiving is not always an easy thing to do at all. And I have to ask whether Joseph was inclined to forgive his brothers before he knew that things had turned out all right for him?

And so I also want to mention something about Joseph's rationale, drawing on what we read in Corinthians last week. This brings me to Joseph's words. Joseph says: **Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good ...** I comment from the position of our contemporary society where we no longer think that the young should be beaten or diminished by words, I speak from my experience as a parent and volunteer youth worker who knows that encouragement works and that preparing a child to be resilient for life's difficulties is important, putting them in harms way, however, is at the very least, a foolish way to proceed. I speak from a belief that God is good and that it is not God who throws bad things at us.

Last week we heard William Barclay on a passage from Corinthians, explaining the vocabulary used by Paul in talking about temptation. We heard that the word used is more akin to the idea of a test. I still don't think that bad things are a test from God but I'll agree to having a different world view on this.

What I'm interested in is the idea that Paul said there is always a way of escape from the test – the sort of way out that an army apparently surrounded has when it suddenly sees an escape route to safety. Barclay says: *The way out is not the way of surrender nor of retreat, but the way of conquest in the power of the grace of God.*

It is my experience, and I hope yours, that in times of difficulty, God the Trinity, walks with me, inspires me, so that I can keep going, and God sees a way to bring good out of the bad.