

## 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year A): St Paul's Sale, 5 [9] August 2020

Gen 37:1-4, 12-28; Ps 105:1-6, 16-22; Rom 10:4-15; Matt 14:22-36

I was to be in Paynesville this Sunday, preaching a version of this homily in the nautical pulpit of St Peter's by the Lake; if you've been there you'll know it's designed like the bow of a boat – that's the front bit, for landlubbers like me!

So particular greetings to Bishop Jeffrey and the people of Paynesville this morning, along with all the clergy and people of the Diocese of Gippsland, and to each of you at home, or from wherever you may be joining us. It has been another challenging week for Victorians, and we find ourselves once again changing our plans, changing the way we worship, work, learn, and interact.

It would be easy to become disheartened, and I would be amazed if anyone praying along today had not had moments of disappointment, frustration, flatness, and perhaps fear; I know I have. Our readings today remind us that we are not alone in that as God's pilgrim people.

I love the tales of the patriarchs and matriarchs that we've been following in our Old Testament readings of late. The great saga of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their long suffering wives Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel (not to mention Hagar, Keturah, Leah and her maid, or Bilhah and Zilpah!) and their extended families all caught up in the patriarchal soap opera!

We only get snippets from Sunday to Sunday, but I recommend reading Genesis chapters 12 to 50 straight through some time; a good 'lockdown diversion' perhaps? It's a cracking good story filled with courage, ambition, jealousy, romance, deception, revelation, conflict, pathos, and hope.

Our forbears in faith are flawed heroes and heroines: enigmatic, complex human beings, with mixed motives, real fears and dreams, and an inescapable sense of God's call on their lives.

As our Psalm this morning suggests, in a 'potted' version of his story Joseph appears to embody all the values of a sage or wise person in the biblical world of the ancient Near East: he interprets dreams, predicts the future, meets adversity with patient confidence, refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife, and does not take revenge on his mean old brothers when given the chance . . . well, not much, anyway!

And yet the little narrative details in Genesis show him to be less than perfect; indeed, he's introduced in today's passage as the annoying little brother, and I should know because I was one – probably still am, if you ask my older siblings!

Our first reading announces the story of the family of Jacob, and yet the narrator jumps straight over his first ten children to Joseph, the favourite, and the son of his old age. I wonder how Benjamin felt about that, being child #12, also born to the beloved Rachel and the son of Jacob's even older age?

Well, we know how his elder brothers felt about Joseph, who brought bad report of them to their father, and specifically those born to the maids of his father's wives. No one likes a snitch, or a snob!

Joseph makes it worse in the verses our first reading skips over: bragging about his dreams in which his brothers' sheaves of wheat bow down to his sheaf, and their stars – even the sun and the moon, if you don't mind – bow down to his rising star.

He provokes them, and we know how it goes when Mum and Dad aren't looking! Even so, what unfolds is ghastly; a mirror to the grim reality of family violence that still besets us as a society.

This is a story, of course. All good stories are true, some of them actually happened! As is common to narratives of this kind, the hero can only achieve greatness by navigating a dangerous path.

The contrast between Joseph's plight in an empty, waterless pit, and the brothers sitting down to eat as though nothing had happened is chilling. Only much later in the story (42:21) do we learn from his brothers that Joseph had pleaded to their deaf ears. Here he seems strangely silent: his dreams of future glory faded; the one who imagined a-scending has de-scended to the depths, his life in the balance.

As the story goes, having resolved to do what they rationalise as the lesser evil of selling him into slavery, Joseph's brothers take the symbol of their father's preferment, that 'amazing technicolour dreamcoat' as the popular musical coins it, and they trick poor Jacob into believing his son was dead – the same 'poor' Jacob, we recall, who tricked his own father into giving him the blessing that belonged to Esau; the sibling rivalry runs deep in this dynasty!

One commentator says at this point: 'Joseph experienced real desolation; faith does not insulate the characters of the Bible from the terrors of the human condition.' (Armstrong, *Genesis*, p.102)

How true that is of Peter's story – a truthfulness that for its first hearers did not depend on accounting for what took place on the lake that night.

All good stories are true, some of them actually happened.

As Dean Susanna [Pain] so helpfully teased out for us last week, in the passage immediately preceding this one the real miracle Jesus performed may have been to help people overcome their fear of not having enough, such that they were able to share what little they had, only to find that the leftovers would have done for tea the next night as well.

The point is not whether a miraculous feeding happened; the point is what happens when we trust that there is enough, and to spare: something that we learn and relearn every time we touch the hem of Jesus' blood-stained garment at this table.

So too what matters here is not whether or how Jesus walked on water; the point is what happens when the wind is against us.

William Barclay explains it this way, 'far more than the story of what Jesus once did in a storm in far-off Palestine; it is [he says] the sign and symbol of what [Jesus] always does for his people, when the wind is contrary and we are in danger of being overwhelmed by the storms of life.' (*The Gospel of Matthew*, vol 2, p.124)

In the midst of the tempest, the disciples came to realise that Jesus was there.

Not in a straightforwardly comforting way; indeed, that presence was quite confronting, despite his constant refrain in the gospels, 'do not be afraid.'

But they were afraid; and reasonably so, for there are things we do well to be afraid of, as the masks we wear these days remind us.

Peter was afraid, as like Joseph he sinks into the pit – albeit one with too much water, rather than not enough.

Literally overwhelmed by wave after wave, whatever faith he had could not insulate him from the terrors of his human condition.

Perhaps that's how we're feeling?

Wave after wave has been crashing over us, crisis after crisis: drought, bushfires, COVID-19 – all in waters already troubled by the trust deficit in a post-Royal Commission world, and the steady cultural displacement of churches from the centre of their communities, and the marginalisation of faith more generally from the public square.

The winds are certainly against us, it would seem; and we may be understandably fearful; even necessarily doubtful.

For the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty.

In order to deal with the inescapable reality of their experience, those mustard seeds of faith needed to grow in Peter and the disciples; they had to let go of what they thought they knew for certain, and their understanding of who Jesus was and is for them in that moment needed to change.

God was in that waterless pit with Joseph, and in the depths of his exile in Egypt.

And as we'll hear in next week's episode, Joseph needed to rethink his faith in order to make sense of his experience. We might not agree with the theology he arrived at, but he was open to new ways of seeing things, which enabled him to reconcile some of the painful things in his past.

Jesus was in the watery pit with Peter. And, as we know, Peter had to rethink his faith again and again: when asked who do you say that I am, and when confronted with his own fears, failures, and self-doubt in times of trial.

And God is with us in the eye of this storm: climbing into the boat of our human condition in Jesus, who bids us come to him, and to cling to him with a faith that is robust enough, and open enough to navigate the straits we're in, because of who he is for us in this moment.

We are in good company, with this great cloud of witnesses as with each other.

Whatever doubts and fears we have, may they only draw us nearer to the one who is always drawing near to us with hand outstretched to heal and save.

*+Richard Gippsland*