

Leavening Methodist Church

Thought for Sunday, 9th August (Taken from 'the Vine')

This week the old testament lesson ([Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28](#)) moves on to the story of Joseph, Jacob's son. We pick up the story when Joseph's brothers are plotting to kill him:

'Here comes that dreamer [Joseph]!' they said to each other. 'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.'

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. 'Let's not take his life,' he said. 'Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him.' Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.' His brothers agreed.

The presence of Joseph's coat is an aggravation to his brothers and we can perhaps empathise with their jealousy over this obvious sign of their father's favouritism. But to be honest, any of the people in this account might hold an uncomfortable mirror to aspects of our own lives.

In Jacob we see a parent who is prepared to privilege one son over the others, who is blinkered to the way his actions aggravate teenage sibling rivalry. In Joseph we can see the tactless teenage snitch, who flaunts his father's favouritism, and derives some of his identity in grassing on his brothers.

In the unnamed brothers is the anonymous assembly, known for their collective voice rather than individual contributions. Here are people that are content to alter their views with changing whims and proposals. They may be named elsewhere, but here all blur into one, where being anonymous helps deflect personal responsibility.

In Judah, who goes along with the jealousy, is the opportunist who proposes a personally profitable option. Why dispose of his brother and be guilty of murder, when the same ends could be reached, minus the guilt of murder or manslaughter, but with a financial reward?

In Reuben, we have a moral voice that falls short. We have someone of conscience but not someone of courage; someone of compromise, but not of conviction. Compared to the other brothers, Reuben stands out as resisting the injustice to Joseph, but compromises on it. Rather than condemning the sin of ending Joseph's life for being a frustrating younger brother, Reuben nevertheless vocally justifies it, suggesting a compromise, where the end result is the same, but the means are different. If we take Reuben as our moral-compass we may well end up adrift, offering self-justification for acts of injustice on the basis that they are not as bad as the alternative. Any of these people can hold an uncomfortable mirror to parts of who we are.

Christ does not call us to be Reubens and Judahs. What Christ does, however, is to challenge us to notice how any of our actions that express hatred, are on the same moral plane as murder.