

Reflection for 16th August 2020 – [Genesis 45:1-15](#) and [Matthew 15: 21-28](#)

Our two Bible passages this week have at their heart the unifying of people who were previously divided whether by events or racial divide. These feel particularly pertinent in current times as we see the momentum of Black Lives Matter gain pace and we hear of the new accord between the UAE and Israel which some believe is motivated in part by a desire to unite with a partner who shares their hatred of another state – ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’! Closer to home, the Covid pandemic has caused many to reflect on wider relationships, to become aware of the needs and vulnerability of their neighbours in ways which they were not before. The upsurge of goodwill and care which this has provoked is a positive aspect of a terrible situation: ‘normal’ petty divisions or historic slights have been set aside in the face of a greater need and it is to be hoped such goodwill outlives the virus. We all know of families whose members live at complete loggerheads until death, or the threat of tragedy strikes, and they come to their senses. But in the Genesis reading we hear an extraordinary example of forgiveness and family making-up: the passage is the end of the story of Joseph and his brothers where in a ‘big reveal’ (I’m trying not to keep seeing Jason Donovan in the musical version!) the rich and successful Joseph reveals his identity to his dumbfounded brothers who had sold him into slavery and likely death. Not only does he tell them all is forgiven and heaps food and money onto them, he tells them that he thinks their terrible crimes were all part of God’s plan so he could be on hand to save the Egyptians from the threatened famine which could have devastated their country. In other words, they were not to blame, they were instruments of the divine will. Joseph is offering the brothers a way out of a cycle of guilt and recriminations, not an ‘excuse’ but a way of leaving it behind them to start afresh. Earlier in the story, Joseph is filled with bitterness and self-pity, but as the story has unfolded his attitude has changed – the spoilt boy has become the more insightful man. Joseph’s instinct now is for forgiveness and a conscious decision not to hate: Joseph wipes the slate clean and focuses on the joy of reunion with his family. He chooses life and joy, but we may be left wondering if the brothers were able to forgive themselves? How much of the intervening time had they spent guilt-ridden by what they had done to Joseph and their father, but unable to see a way out? We may think it was easy for him to do this: he had enjoyed wealth and status while his brothers had endured years of famine and want, but he went beyond forgiveness to sharing his good, God-given fortune – he had life and had it abundantly, so his instinct was to share that with those he loved.

In the story in Matthew, we see division of a different kind, an ugly example of racial hatred. Jesus and his disciples are approached by a Canaanite woman. The land of Canaan, the original promised land of the Israelites, was by this time occupied by a people despised by the Jews for their pagan religious beliefs. The language of the passage is shocking: Jesus compares the woman to a dog and initially denies her request. This is not the Jesus we expect; what is going on? The disciples are blatantly bigoted, taking Jesus’ silence to her pleas as agreement with their views and asking him to send this annoying, inferior woman away. The woman’s response is dignified and has all the hallmarks of someone who has heard and endured worse. We might expect her to be indignant, to respond to the serious insult with a biting riposte, but her focus is on the needs of her daughter. She has no time to worry about name-calling, she is focused on getting her daughter the cure she needs. She turns the insult aside, and in so doing is brought into the fold which Jesus has said is only for the lost sheep of Israel. What are we to make of what appears to be Jesus expressing these racist, bigoted sentiments? Are we to believe his mind is changed by her reply? Or can we

see it as Jesus holding a mirror up to the views held by his disciples and followers then showing them how wrong they are? In replying to the disciples 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel' they interpret this as meaning only the Jewish people, confirming their own narrowmindedness. But what about his next words "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it before the dogs"? Following on from his previous words, his disciples would have identified themselves as being the children in question, the Children of Israel, and probably smirked with self-satisfaction at the confirmation that Jesus shared their opinions, that the woman was beneath contempt. But in a heartbeat Jesus blows that apart by granting the woman's request and making it clear that it is her faith, not her gender or race, which is the key to her salvation. Jesus brings this pariah into the same fold as his disciples, ignoring divisions and unifying all under the umbrella of faith. The woman sets aside the initial insult and rejection in order to receive joy, just as Joseph sets aside a great wrong in order to have the joy of reunion. They see the bigger picture, the better goal and move beyond the nursing and nourishing of hurts and grievances, the chasing of the desire to get even.

In Christ we are not only called to set aside our tally of injustices, our prejudices, our misplaced sense of superiority, we are challenged to accept that our interpretation of events which may have a terrible impact on us may not be the whole picture. This can be very hard and may not be possible for months or even years after the event, but until we do, we are trapped in a prison of our own making. In Christ we are challenged to see beyond ourselves, to break those bonds and to embrace the life he offers us abundantly.