

Prayer of Approach

Loving God,
like Joseph, when we look backwards at our lives,
we can often see the places you were with us,
even if we didn't notice it at the time:
subtly nudging us into the right direction,
comforting us in times of pain and loss,
nurturing us to grow from our challenges,
celebrating with us in our joys and successes,
working anonymously through coincidence and instinct.

Give us the faith to trust in you no matter what we face,
the courage to place our dreams in your hands,
the wisdom to keep our hearts open to notice your nudges,
and the strength to follow where you lead without hesitation,
confident that your loving presence will always be with us.
Amen.

Reflection on Genesis 45:1-15

Last week we talked about family breakdown and about how comforting it is that scripture has handed us stories of our ancestors in faith that show that they and their families, just like us, are not perfect. And in today's scripture passage, we see reconciliation in this family conflict.

But just to recap what has happened since Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. He was sold to Potiphar, and he was eventually put in prison. While he was in prison, the Pharaoh had some strange dreams, and Joseph was the only one able to interpret that they foretold a great seven-year long famine that would come after seven good harvest years. So Pharaoh lifted Joseph up as second in command, and gave him the task of preparing the country for the coming famine. The famine ended up affecting the whole area, including Joseph's home, and so the brothers came to Egypt to get food.

Joseph does not immediately tell them he is their brother. He first questions them carefully, accuses them of being spies, and puts them in prison for three days. Then he keeps Simeon in prison and sends the rest of them back with orders to bring with them their youngest brother Benjamin, who is the only other son of Joseph's mother, Rachel, and who it appears their father Jacob favours just as he had favoured Joseph. Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go at first, in order to convince him, Judah offer himself, and Ruben offers his own sons as collateral for Benjamin's life. When the brothers come back to Egypt with Benjamin, Joseph also favours him, blessing him and giving him five times as much as the other brothers. Then Joseph has Benjamin framed for theft, and threatens to keep him as a slave, while allowing the other brothers to go home free. Why all this deception? Maybe partly to get back at them, and partly to test them. In the end, the brothers will not leave Benjamin in Egypt. Judah begs for his release, and offers to remain as a slave to Joseph in his place, and he explains their father Jacob's love and favouritism for Benjamin, which is exactly what caused the brothers' deadly jealousy against Joseph earlier in their lives, but now it is brought up to show compassion to Jacob, and prevent his suffering.

And if it then that Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and they reconcile.

Reconciliation is not easy, whether it is between estranged family members, or groups of people who have been in conflict.

We know Joseph and his brothers are not perfect, and they do not act perfectly here either, so how does this reconciliation happen?

I think one of the most important elements in reconciliation, which we see in this scripture passage, is change, transformation. It is one thing to apologize for harm we've done, but quite another to show that we can change and not cause that harm again. The brothers have shown this in

their actions. Their father Jacob, has not changed all that much, he is still playing favourites, but they have not remained the bitter people that once allowed jealousy to turn into hatred and violence, instead they are showing care and compassion to both Jacob and Benjamin. It's probably partly the wisdom of aging that has allowed them to respond better, but I imagine part of it is having seen the consequences of what they did, and deciding that, they were not going to let their own hurt make them hurt others in the future.

But the brothers are not the only ones who have grown and changed for the better. Joseph, as a young man was arrogant and leaned into his privilege, and at first, when he meets his brothers, he goes back to those ways as he manipulates them.

But he has also grown up, and then, comes this moment, when he sees how they have changed, they have become better people, caring people, and he is overcome with emotion, and able to put aside that mask of arrogance and power. And he cries. He cries so loud, everyone can hear him throughout the palace. Can you imagine what is all going on inside Joseph in this moment, what is pouring out of him with these tears? Think about the last time you had a really good cry, what emotions poured out of you like this? Sorrow and great pain? Happiness and great joy? Shame and guilt? Love?

I think Joseph is probably feeling a combination of these things. Sorrow and pain for the years lost, happiness and joy at seeing that his brothers are men of integrity, shame and guilt at his own bad behaviour, as a young man, and recently, and love, love for a family that he had thought he would never see again.

These tears mark Joseph's transformation not only inside but also in the eyes of his brothers; he is no longer the stony faced commander sitting above them, he is their brother, and he is embracing them.

And the words he speaks shows that he is no longer their brother from years ago, the tactless, arrogant young man, eager to boast about dreams of his own grandeur; he offers generous words of forgiveness, and he shares his own interpretation of events, which shows kindness in trying to alleviate the brothers' guilt, but also shows humility, that he now sees his talents and his power, as gifts of God, not for his own glory, but in order to be of service to others.

This transformation that Joseph and his brothers have gone through, which has made this reconciliation possible, is also a gift from God.

And, unlike a gift for interpreting dreams, it is a gift that we are all offered, too. Last week, I reminded us all that God loves us, even through we are not perfect, we have faults and brokenness in us. But that does not mean God does not want to help us be better people. God offers us grace and love and mercy freely and equally, not like Jacob, who favours one son, and gives him gifts that the others don't receive.

When we have done wrong, we can come to God and ask for forgiveness and be confident that we will receive it. But the biggest gift God offers us with that mercy, is a chance for transformation, a chance to grow past our wrongs, to learn to do things differently, to be nurtured into better people, the people God wills for us to be.

And it is this transformation that is so crucial when we are in conflict and want to be reconciled. Sometimes it is us that needs to grow and change, sometimes it is those with whom we are in conflict, most often, if not always, just like with Jacob's sons, it is all of us who need God's transformation so that we can grow back together.

Now, this isn't to say every conflict gets tied up neatly, or that we can overcome all our faults and become perfect, I doubt Jacob's sons never had any more awkward or tense moments. But just as God's abundant love never leaves us, as long as we are open to it, God's transformative mercy is available to us, to help us grow and reconcile with each other, with God, and with our selves. Thanks be to God.