

'The heart of the matter'

Today we manage to pick up the tail end of a story which only began last week. That wonderful character in the bible called Joseph went from being a 17 year old boy who was thrown into a pit then sold into slavery to the Ishmaelites last week, is in a very different situation in today's reading from Genesis.

So what happened in between?

To really get a grip on the story of Joseph it is best to read through the many chapters in the book of Genesis in the lead up to today, but a very quick summary is this.

When Joseph arrived in Egypt he set to work as a slave. At a particularly low point in his life he was thrown into gaol and while he was there is continued to dream. The dreams in themselves were both blessings and curses but something of his reputation in having not only the dreams but also being able to interpret them meant he came to the Pharaoh's attention. In a long story very short, Pharaoh decided that Joseph had some wisdom and as one of the dreams predicted that there would be 7 years of good harvest followed by 7 years of drought, Joseph quickly rose through the ranks of the household slaves and gained the trust of the Pharaoh. Somehow, he ended up being put in charge of the household and ended up helping the Egyptian people stockpile food and goods during the 7 good years so that there was plenty to eat in the 7 years of drought.

In the midst of the drought Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt seeking some food from the Pharaoh that they might take back to their father and in the process of them doing this, they come before Joseph but they do not recognise him.

Today's reading sees Joseph recognise his brothers, be moved with compassion and he explained to them not only who he was but how he could help them. Joseph had somehow come to understand that being sold into slavery was a way of God preparing him for the role he was to play in restoring and caring for the family many years later.



Now much is written about Joseph and how he was a symbol of God at work in the lives of the Israelites- some even suggest he was a symbol predicting the coming of Jesus. I think that in some ways that does not matter. Perhaps it is best understood as a sign of God's desire to reconcile all peoples. And this reading speaks of Joseph making the first move to reconcile with his brothers.

Many years later Jesus had travelled away to an area of Tyre and Sidon. It was off the beaten path and an unusual place to find him, but the reading we hear from Matthew today picks up the last part of a conversation Jesus is having with his disciples. They knew that Jesus had upset the Pharisees with some of his teachings and he was responding by challenging the way the Pharisees knew the Law and the Scriptures, but they really didn't understand it. Jesus could see that while they said one thing, they were not living it out. And so he speaks of what comes out of the heart.

Interestingly up until this point in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus was clearly ministering to the Jewish people. He even says this to the Canaanite woman. Maybe he had travelled to the area of Tyre and Sidon for a break, or maybe he felt God was leading him there, but prior to meeting this

woman, his mind was set on the Jews. Then this woman who doesn't even get a name challenges him. He even refers to her as a dog- one of the worst things you could say to a person in those days- but she comes back at him with the words- even the dogs get to eat the crumbs under the master's table.



Suddenly Jesus can see her as more than a Canaanite woman- rather he sees into her heart and sees her faith. And Jesus is changed. This nameless woman who had the audacity to challenge Jesus has changed his mind, and from this point onwards Jesus ministers to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Today we will celebrate communion. We may eat bread and drink juice or wine or water. Whatever we eat and drink today are what we would normally eat and drink- and Jesus comes and changes it. You see just as Jesus was changed, so are we whenever we eat and drink together. We are changed in our hearts, helping us to see beyond the barriers and prejudices we might have. We are able to be changed, just as Joseph was changed, to see God at work in our lives.

As we eat and drink we do so not finding the crumbs under the table but as invited guests. We come not because of who we are, but of who God has enabled us to be.

It doesn't matter what our differences may be- whether we are slaves or in charge of households, whatever the difference we may experience, they make us richer and together we are richer still.

God sees our hearts, sees the intentions and our hopes and dreams and meets us in the bread and wine, in the food and the drink, that we might be changed and restored.

In the reconciliation Joseph had with his brothers, his family was able to eat and drink and be safe. In the meeting with the Canaanite woman, Jesus was able to reconcile his ministry with both Jew and Gentile.

In our meeting with God and with each other we are grown and strengthened to share our faith, in what we say, in what we do and how we lived our lives- in ordinary and everyday ways.