

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 16 August 2020

“THE GOD OF SURPRISES”

(Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:13-32; Matthew 15:21-28)

Over the past couple of months our Old Testament readings have been bringing us stories of the Patriarchs from the Book of Genesis. We have read of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rachel, of Jacob and Esau, and of Joseph and his brothers.

One thing we missed was the first reading in the series: it got missed out because the date of Trinity Sunday got us started a bit too late to fit in what is actually the first reading in the series. But that first reading, that scene-setting passage, from Genesis 12, is in a sense the key to it all. It tells how God called Abraham from his homeland to the East, and made him great promises. He would make Abraham a great nation. He would give him a land for his people. And not only would he bless Abraham, but through him all peoples would be blessed.

But as we have read these stories, it is hard to see those promises being fulfilled. Good things happen, but there are lots of problems as well. Abraham and Sarah are very old indeed before their promised son is finally born. Isaac and Rebekah have a long wait too. Parents show favoritism towards particular sons, which causes great tension. There is family division: in fact Ishmael and Esau are more or less cast aside from the story. Esau wants to kill Jacob, who has used improper means to get the family birthright and blessing. And last week we heard of favoured son Joseph, certainly an arrogant and foolish young man, thrown into a pit by his brothers, and then taken to Egypt as a slave.

The people at the centre of God's wonderful promises truly have feet of clay, don't they? And yet, God is at work in unexpected ways. A number of times he brings blessings when people have almost given up. He rescues people when it looks as if the story will come to an end. The God of Genesis is a God of surprises.

Today we heard what we might regard as the climax of the story of Joseph. Because of his God-given ability to interpret dreams, Joseph has been brought out of prison in Egypt to explain to Pharaoh what God is telling him through his disturbing dreams. "Seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought", is God's warning. "You need someone to help you get organized for those tough years", is Joseph's advice, and as we know Joseph suddenly finds himself as Chief Minister under Pharaoh.

Two years into the drought, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt seeking help as their resources in Canaan dry up. Joseph assists them, but keeps his identity from them.

However, if the brothers come back again seeking help, they must demonstrate the truth of the story they have told by bringing with them their youngest brother Benjamin, whom Joseph knows is his only full brother in the family. When the brothers do return, they bring Benjamin, and Joseph hatches a plan.

What are these brothers like now? Are they callous towards Benjamin as they had been to Joseph many years before? Joseph sets a test for them. He has a special cup placed into Benjamin's sack. It is of course found, and Benjamin is accused of stealing it. But Judah, the one who had had the idea of selling Joseph as a slave, now steps forward. "Please let me take Benjamin's punishment", he asks. "It would be a tragedy for my father if this son of his old age did not return."

And it is at this point that Joseph sends out his officials and reveals himself to his astounded brothers. There is much emotional weeping and wailing, and perhaps also some gnashing of teeth from the brothers. Of course they are terrified. What is Joseph going to do to them now? I wonder how long it takes them to remember those long-forgotten dreams of Joseph that had so annoyed them. Those dreams have come true, and Joseph has complete power over them.

But Joseph sees signs of change in them, and he is ready to forgive. But more than that: he can see the bigger picture. “It was not you who sent me here, but God”, he tells them.

Later on he will say: “You meant it to harm me, but God meant it for good.” The God who can, if he chooses, speak through dreams, has been at work, even when bad things have happened. And as we come to end of Genesis, we find Abraham’s family safe in Egypt, where they will stay for generations, until **they** need rescuing, and God raises up Moses to lead them to the promised land.

Throughout the Old Testament, there is a tension between the promises and the purposes of God, and the flaws and failures of his people. As I said, these people had feet of clay. Abraham believed, but he also did the wrong thing by Sarah more than once. Isaac and Rebekah played favourites. Jacob was a trickster, Joseph’s brothers were clearly a pretty poor lot, and Joseph certainly was not the nicest of brothers.

But God doesn’t wait for perfection from his people. He calls his people to righteous and faithful living, but he is also ready to forgive. God is working out his purposes, and he works with people who may not always be the most commendable, but who are open to his call.

He worked through Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Elijah, Jonah and others who all had very obvious failings. But they **were** open to his call. And he even brought blessings not only to the people of Israel, but on occasions to the nations as well. He brought blessing to Egypt through Joseph. And from time to time you read in the Old Testament not only of messages of judgement against evil nations, but also of blessings that came to people of various nations through the family of Abraham.

And then in the New Testament we meet someone who is a **real** human, but also a perfect human: one who is fact is God, sharing our human existence. Jesus is in fact the key to the fulfilment of those promises made to Abraham 2000 years before. He will bring to us who also have feet of clay a new relationship with the holy God: a relationship based on forgiveness and reconciliation. Incidentally, those stories in Genesis have lots of division, but there are also stories of reconciliation, as we heard this morning. God's purpose after all is to **bring people together**, just as it is to **bring people to himself**. The unity of people, especially God's people, is a beautiful thing, as Psalm 133 reminded us.

Jesus fulfilled those great promises to Abraham, as he brought God's message to the people of Israel. This was *his family of birth*, his priority in mission, as we heard in our Gospel this morning. At this point in the plan of God, the people of Israel were the ones to whom Jesus was sent. And yet on occasion during his ministry, as we heard, crumbs **would** fall from the table and bring blessing to Gentiles as well. The mission to the Gentiles was a mission which would basically wait till Jesus had died and risen, opening salvation to all people, and it would need to wait till the Spirit had been poured out on all Christ's people at Pentecost.

Over the years, more and more Gentiles became followers of Christ, so that in many places the churches were essentially Gentile churches. Just as Jews had regarded the Gentiles as outsiders to the promises of God, so now there was the temptation for Gentile Christians to regard Jews as the ones who had failed their God-given call. Particularly in the great city of Rome, where most citizens had a low opinion of Jews, those strange outsiders, this would be a particular temptation for Christians. And so Paul calls his readers in the church in Rome to maintain a humble outlook, and not to look down on Jewish people.

We too need to remember that **our** roots go back to Abraham and his descendants. In a spiritual sense **we are** Abraham's descendants. God's plan was always that people of all nations would in due course find salvation in him. With the coming of Jesus, the message of salvation was clearly opened up to all people, Jews **and** Gentiles. But Paul doesn't want us to assume that God has now rejected his ancient people: it is not for us to judge them and condemn them. Sadly, the church has at times treated Jews atrociously, and in the past century it has been slow to call out anti-Semitism for the evil that it is.

The people of Israel are God's ancient people, and Paul believes that God hasn't finished with them yet. He may still have more surprises up his sleeve.

And in any case, says Paul, we need to **learn** from them. Yes, many physical descendants of Abraham have cut themselves off from God's true family. But let's get the point: we who are Gentile Christians must not make the same mistake. We must **keep going** in faith, and not take our salvation for granted, as the people of Israel did so often in the Old Testament.

Ultimately, all humans, Jew and Gentile, are the same. We are all sinners, in need of God's forgiveness. Yes, we all have feet of clay.

Ultimately, all **Christians**, whether Jewish Christian or Gentile Christian, are the same. We are all sinners, who have accepted God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus the Messiah. These stories from Genesis are in a real sense our stories too.

What then do we learn from these stories? We are challenged to **treat people with love and justice**: to follow the good examples and turn aside from the bad examples. We are challenged to **keep a humble attitude**. God works through flawed people: he did then as he does now. So let us be slow to judge others, and quick to acknowledge our own flaws and failings. We are challenged to **keep going in tough times**: God's good things do not always come straightaway, and God's timing is ultimately the best.

And above all we are encouraged to **keep trusting God**: we don't always see what he is doing behind the scenes, but he is often quietly at work, and will keep bringing good out of evil. Of course, that is particularly relevant right now: in these tough and confusing times, let us **look** for the signs that God is at work, and let us keep living as Christ's followers, knowing that he is with us even when we are not conscious of that presence, and that he **is** working his purposes out for our good. Amen.