

Arnhem/Nijmegen, August 16th 2020

Genesis 37.1-4, 12-28. Psalm 133. Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32. Mathew 15.10-28.

Some of you will know that I translate books for a living. Over the past 20 odd years I have translated around 50 novels. Not all of them masterpieces of literature, like the story of Joseph – in fact, most of them were definitely *not* – but the work has given me a sixth sense for whatever seems to be not quite right in a story's plot or character development or structure. It can be annoying when reading a book for fun, because this critical voice at the back of my mind goes on like: 'Really?' And it definitely is *very* annoying when you are preparing a sermon on one of your favourite stories in the Bible – but this is what happened. Suddenly there was this niggling feeling that something odd was going on, and it was literally in the middle of the night that it came to me as a question that refused to go away:

Why did all the brothers go to Egypt in the first place? And not only once, but twice? That doesn't make sense!

From later chapters we know that Jacob's extended family consisted of 70 persons: Jacob himself, his sons and their families. We also know that in this patriarchal society the fathers each had their own little kingdom for which they were responsible. They had to provide for their families, they had to protect them, they were the ones who had to sort out any conflicts among their wives, their offspring, their servants. And then, in the midst of a famine, all those family heads, all those patriarchs head off in person to Egypt to buy bread, leaving their families without leadership and protection for months on end? Really? Why didn't they send their servants?

Hm. Odd.

We know how the story goes. Joseph recognizes his brothers and gives them a really hard time. Eventually they have to leave Simeon behind as a hostage, to make sure that they will return with Joseph's younger brother Benjamin. This second time they had no choice but to go, as they couldn't leave Simeon to his fate. But why did they all go? They could have sent just Judah and Benjamin, for instance, to minimize the risk of something happening to all of them; because where would that have left their families?

Hm. Odd.

Now if something like this happens in one of my novels, I usually conclude that the author has been sloppy for the sake of a feel-good story, hoping to get away with it. I moan about it to the editor, and if it is really bad I make some subtle changes to cover up the flaws. But this is not one of my novels. It is Holy Scripture, writings infused with the life-giving breath of God, meant to bring us life. When something strikes us as odd, we do not moan to the editor, neither do we pretend it isn't there. We sit up straight and pay attention.

If all the brothers were there, in Egypt, apparently they *had* to be there. So let me re-word the question: Why was it essential that all the brothers should go to Egypt?

First we need to consider the perspective of the story's authors. The people who compiled the book of Genesis were in exile in Babylon, struggling with the frightening possibility that God might have given up on them because of the mess they had made of their calling to be God's holy people. In Jacob's family history they must have seen some parallels with their own situation: they, too, were a community torn apart. They had been divided in two kingdoms for centuries; the southern kingdom of Judah, and the northern kingdom of the 10 tribes (named after Joseph, or after his son Ephraim). Joseph had been exiled by the Assyrians, and a century later Judah had been exiled by the Babylonians. There wasn't much left of the people of God, and their future looked very bleak indeed. They could not expect any restoration, and they knew very well that they didn't deserve it. In Genesis, it is as if we hear them saying: Look, we've been making a mess of things all our lives. We were never fit to be the people of God anyway.

Over the past weeks we certainly have seen some dysfunctional individuals and families, haven't we? Most of the history of Jacob is just one big mess of lies, betrayal, murder, envy and greed. Time and again the community that is growing out of Abraham's offspring is torn apart by the misbehaviour of one or some of its members. Not exactly a community that is fit to be a shining beacon to the world. Not exactly a community in which all the nations of the earth can expect to be blessed. So it's not just that it's all a big mess. It is God's promise to Abraham that is at stake. If Jacob's family will go on like this, will it not come

to a point that God will give up on them, like he gave up on humankind in the time of Noah?

But after a whole book of embarrassing stories of betrayal, murder, envy and greed, there comes this wonderful moment that the whole people of God emerge as a harmonious unity: ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. The whole dysfunctional family is being transformed into a healed community, willing to live together in harmony. It is Psalm 133 come to life: Behold, how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity. For there the Lord has promised his blessing. And so this story of a reconciliation in Egypt brings hope to, and expresses the hope of, a ruined people in Babylon.

We can now see why it was essential that all the brothers should be there at that redemptive moment. But that is not all. It is also significant that both kingdoms, Joseph and Judah, are represented as being active in this redemption. Both kingdoms bring forth a saviour who is willing to give up his life for the wellbeing of his family. Jos has pointed out last week that Joseph is a type of Christ, sent before his people to save them from disaster. Today we also see Judah, offering himself as a ransom for Benjamin. Let us not downplay what he is doing here. Slaves in ancient Egypt were absolutely nothing. They were at the total disposal of their masters, and often this meant also sexual exploitation. Judah is really offering to empty himself completely. Not only is he willing to give up his own family, his wealth, his freedom – he is willing to give up his identity, his masculine pride, the core of his being. No wonder Joseph wails so loudly that all Egypt is wondering what is going on.

So: reconciliation is brought on by God, who reunites the brothers. As a response, there is a new spirit of self-sacrifice and love within the family of Jacob. Transformed by the sufferings they inflicted upon themselves and others, they now embrace each other. They decide to let bygones be bygones, and to live together in harmony from now on. This indeed is a people fit to be a blessing to the world.

For the people in exile, torn apart and divided, this is a life-giving vision of hope. God did not give up on Jacob's family. He will not give up on them.

For us, the New Testament community that is sent to be a blessing in this broken world, there is this same life-giving vision of hope. Looking back on 2000 years of church history, we have much to wail about, haven't we? But our hope

is not in a type or shadow of Christ. Our hope is the living, eternal, universal Christ, who gave up his divine life and redeemed all that is warped and twisted in our world. We are united into his body, made one so that the world might know the love of God by seeing it at work in us. Let us respond to that by building a community of love. Where we, like Joseph, are transformed by our difficulties and pain, to become more Christ-like. Where we, like Judah, take responsibility for each other, even if it will cost us dearly. Where we do not bear grudges, but are more than happy to forgive, and to start again.

For this we need God's grace. For this, we need God's healing. For this we need God's Spirit. And so, let us pray the Psalm Prayer that goes with Psalm 133:

*Grant to your people, good Lord,
the spirit of unity,
that they may dwell together in your love,
and so bear to the world
the ointment of your healing and the
dew of your blessing;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*