

## St Mary Abbots

Trinity 5

1 Corinthians 4:8-13, Genesis 41:1-16,25-37

Father Christopher

I seem to have preached rather a few political sermons over the last few weeks, and was hoping for a week off. Both of our readings this morning however seem to be very much about power and decision-making, if in quite different ways.

In our first reading Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream and is given great power over Egypt as Grand Vizier - essentially Prime Minister - if without any of the checks on power that that office is subject to. Remember, Joseph is a slave, as his descendants would be after him, before eventually being led to freedom by Moses. And so, I think that begs the question of whether Joseph's acceptance of great power might not be seen as collaboration. Or should it instead be seen as a great triumph for a Hebrew? And indeed, who could blame him for escaping prison and possible death by interpreting Pharaoh's dream for him, and then accepting the highest office in the land?

Were Joseph to defend himself on the Today programme, rather as Nadhim Zahari has been having to defend taking the job of chancellor the day before saying that he thought Boris should resign, I am sure he would say that, regardless of any reservations about Pharaoh, he took on the job of gathering in grain and other produce over the seven full years, for the sake of the common good during the course of the seven lean years which followed, both for the sake of ordinary Egyptian people, and others, such as his own kin who came from Israel. And, for the sake of these greater goods, it was worth perhaps compromising his own principles a little.

In our second reading, from 1 Corinthians, we have, on the other hand, St Paul telling the Christians of Corinth that they are far too comfortable – they have compromised to the extent of their faith making little difference to them. They are, in other words, smug. As we try to reconstruct the nature of their community, it seems that there were people of different social standings, and that those with status in the world lorded it over others in the church; and that those who were thought to be particularly spiritual were given greater status within the church too; but without giving anything up and making any real changes to their life for the sake of Christ. And how does St Paul respond to this? With gentle encouragement? With stinging reproach? Well actually, with swingeing sarcasm.

We know that for St Paul the most coveted title was that of apostle, which had hitherto been limited to Jesus's disciples, but which Paul took on himself as a result of Jesus's appearing to him, long after his death, on the road to Damascus. And here he ranges himself and the rest of the apostles against the example of the Corinthians:

*'Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you. ... We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised.'*

This is clearly false modesty if ever I heard it. For him being a follower of Christ means being poor for Him; being fools; being weak; hungering and thirsting; being naked; being reviled; being persecuted; being defamed; even made as the filth of this world.

To try to have it all - to follow Christ and enjoy the acclaim, status and riches of the world - is not to take up your cross and follow Him. But how to fit this image of discipleship with the career of Joseph, that great patriarch, in his work at the highest level for the Egyptian pharaoh, a worshipper of multiple gods, not to mention the oppression of his regime?

Well, first of all, it is not easy.

But secondly, as we have been encountering in our Morning Prayer group on Zoom, in the Hebrew Bible - the Old Testament - God often seems to work out His purposes through the very worst of human behaviour. We have been reading, for example, about Samson and Delilah. His seeking a Philistine wife so as to do down the Philistines, and his first wife then being burned with her father so as to revenge the decision to give her to someone else; his killing 1,000 with a donkey's collar bone which he picks up after freeing himself from one of their attempts to tie him up; and, of course, his pulling down of the columns of Dagon's temple, in an early example of a suicide attack, killing more than in his whole twenty year career. And this is the man set over the people of Israel as their judge in the days before they begged for a king – and we all know how that turned out. Even the great King David sent a man to his death so that he could have his wife, Bathsheba. How to make sense of God working through such evil?

Well, the problem of evil – how a good and all-powerful God can allow, let alone work through, evil – is not one that I am going to solve this morning. But the answer, or as close as we are going to get, to the conundrum presented by today's two readings is I think to separate out the sinfulness or otherwise of the individuals involved, from the *results* which God allows to flourish out of even the worst human behaviour.

Contrary to the proverb, with God it is possible to turn pigs' ears into silk purses. Not only that, it appears to be His stock in trade. Just as, in our making idiotic mistakes, over and again, whatever the judgment of our fellow men, women and children, God somehow finds a way through; indeed, sees the way through even before we muck things up.

Something else that I'd like to draw attention to in the story of Joseph, is that while he perhaps compromises himself by working with and for pharaoh, he clearly also achieves a greater good in feeding the people of Egypt and her surrounding neighbours, than if he had refused to help, and remained in prison through his own scruples. Sometimes moral absolutism turns out to be the greater evil than compromise.

Turning back again to Paul, his injunctions to humility, to shining as lights against worldly values, stand. But in Paul, if this isn't heretical, we see I think some of the pride that can come from self-righteousness. An all but impossible balance to strike, between being steadfast in following the way of Christ, and the vanity that Jesus points out in the pharisee as he prays, *'O God, I thank you that I am not as other men.'*

But even where we find self-righteousness in Paul, we still see God working His purposes out – the Corinthians did after all need his correction, even if it comes with some pride on Paul's part. And no bad thing for us to know that even the apostle to the Gentiles, to all the known world, fell into sin and error with the rest of us. Even in his failing – in his all too obviously human frailty, as we see too in a very different way in Peter - we learn something of how, in our *own* fallen humanity, we can both strive to be better and be gentle with ourselves, because even the apostles had their imperfections.

Even in the apparent contradictions and tensions of scripture, as we grapple with them, in the glorious way in which passages with no other obvious connection are brought together at Matins, we find instruction in following the way of the saints – a frequently faltering, imperfect way, in which we are all called to be fools for Christ. A way which does not always have clear moral judgments, but in which we are called to grope forward, with fear and trembling, and in humility, listening all the while to our conscience; but also knowing that, to mix metaphors, whatever we throw at Him, God will always be there to catch us, and that whatever the odds, He will continue to work out His mysterious purposes in our flawed lives, the infinite worth of which in His eyes we can do nothing to diminish, however hard we might at times seem to try.

Amen