

Evensong 28th July 2019: Genesis 42.1-25; I Corinthians 10.1-24

Some of you will be familiar with the television programme 'Who do you think you are?' It's where celebrities are invited to trace their family tree and the results can be fascinating. All sorts of stories come out and in the process we all learn a bit more about our history. The programme taps into a widespread interest in ancestry which has become big business in recent years. As families become more scattered and complex we seem to have an increasing need to know where we come from.

That need applies as much to faith as it does to our family tree. It's important that we know about our spiritual forebears. About the challenges that they faced. Fortunately, we do not have to rifle through trunks in attics or dusty archives. The Bible contains great chunks of the story of God's people. And one of the best stories in the canon is the story of Joseph. It's wonderful family soap opera that Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber turned into a fantastic stage show. In this week's episode we have moved into the seven years of famine that followed the seven years of plenty. The famine clearly affected the whole region of the Middle East because Jacob had to send ten of his sons to Egypt in search of grain. With Joseph and Benjamin these sons would be the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. And it was probably with these twelve in mind that Jesus chose twelve disciples.

The encounter between Joseph and his brothers is worthy of Eastenders or Coronation Street. He knows who they are but they don't recognise him. And there's a long build up to the big reveal. In the meantime, Joseph makes the most of the situation. He makes his brothers sweat, accusing them of being spies. They get their comeuppance for selling him off as a slave. And they actually recognise that this may be some sort of divine punishment.

It is good to be reminded that our spiritual ancestors had complicated and sometimes dysfunctional families like ours. And that the purpose of God can still be fulfilled through them. This family saga brought Jacob's clan down into Egypt and laid the foundations for the story of Moses and the Exodus, a pivotal event in the story of God's people. The story of Joseph is an important one and it is important as Christians that we are familiar with it.

However. Knowing where we come from does not mean that we are prisoners of our past. Just because we have inherited uncle Arthur's nose or his curly hair, that doesn't mean we also have to inherit his weakness for alcohol or his wandering eye. Quite the opposite. Knowing our history means that we are not doomed to repeat it.

And I think this is one of the points that St Paul is trying to make in his first Letter to the Corinthians. He wanted them to know about their spiritual ancestry. About the story of Moses who led God's people out of Egypt through the Red Sea. They drank from the spiritual rock and that rock was Christ. The Word of God who was there at the beginning of creation was there in the wilderness with God's people. But those people disobeyed God. They indulged in idolatry, worshipping the golden calf. They committed sexual immorality. They put the Lord their God to the test and they were punished for it. And we need to learn from their example. We need to avoid setting our hearts on evil things as they did and that is why we need to know where we come from.

The Whig interpretation of history is that we are constantly making progress and that the present is always better than the past. I think recent events have probably dented that view somewhat but Paul warns the Corinthians not to fall into the same spiritual trap. Not to think that they are superior to the faithful people who came before them. The Corinthians have a tendency to arrogance and Paul advises them not to assume that they are invulnerable. As stories like the one about Joseph reminds us, we are all subject to the same human temptations. But God is faithful and if we seek his help he will give it.

One of the temptations that Paul warns against is participating in pagan worship. This is a temptation for God's people through much of the Hebrew Bible and seems to be an issue for the church in Corinth. Idols in themselves are nothing but the worship offered to them is not to God. To eat at a friend's table, or even at a banquet in a temple, food consecrated to an idol is one thing. Taking part in a pagan religious rite, comparable to the Lord's Supper, is quite another. Paul emphasises our freedom in Christ but says that we shouldn't always exploit that freedom. Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial he says. Sometimes for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of weaker Christians or people who might misunderstand our actions, we have to refrain from exercising our freedom in Christ.

And I think that's a real challenge for us as Christians. We have freedom in Christ and we want to share that freedom with others. But in a past Christian society where there are many other competing views how can we be distinctive? What are the things that might mark us out as Christians in a positive way? Is it our contribution to the community? The way in which we treat others? Or our integrity at work? Or the quality of our relationships? The answers to these questions are not simple. But in trying to find them it helps if we know what others have done. How members of our spiritual family have dealt with them. Not just in the Bible but throughout the history of the church. There is no challenge that we face that someone else has not faced before us, and knowing about our history can help us as we negotiate the present. The God of Joseph and of Paul and of now is the same God. He is intimately concerned with the details of our lives. He is with us in all the challenges that we face. And he is faithful. Amen.