

Sunday 17th October 2021 – Joseph (2) ‘The Fall Guy’ (Genesis 37:12-36)

One of the best true crime dramas of recent years was ‘The Lost Honour of Christopher Jefferies’ on ITV. Mr Jefferies was wrongly arrested at Christmas 2010 for the infamous murder of Jo Yeates in Bristol, and despite not being charged, his name and photo were leaked to the press. Jefferies was Jo’s landlord, and for days he was treated as a hate figure, largely because of his eccentric appearance and habits. Nevertheless, he was entirely innocent – the crime had in fact been committed by her neighbour, who was convicted some time later.

The national coverage shattered Mr Jefferies, who was not only unjustly accused but publicly humiliated, and the TV drama narrates not only how he proved his innocence but also pursued a successful claim for wrongful arrest.

We are fortunate to live in a country where serious miscarriages of justice are relatively rare. That said, it is also true that many victims do not receive the justice they deserve – for example, it is horrifying that less than 2% of rape allegations even in the UK actually lead to a conviction. Many of us, therefore, at some point in our lives have to face the situation where we are unjustly treated – if not as a result of a crime, perhaps something at work or at school, or even having to face a bad report or misrepresentation of our motives or actions which we did not deserve. **Facing injustice comes in many forms.**

And it hurts. It one thing to be justly punished. To be unjustly punished is quite another. And our story today details one of the most well-known such incidents in history – Joseph’s kidnap and subsequent selling into slavery by his brothers.

We’re not told how Joseph felt at the time, the emphasis is entirely on the players around him. Like many real victims, Joseph becomes anonymous, at the mercy of those with power. We can’t see his state of mind, so we can only guess at what he was thinking and feeling. How did he feel towards his brothers, or his captors? Was he just relieved that his life was spared or traumatised that he was abandoned and left alone – or both? Was he able to cry out to God or did he sink into depression and mental anguish?

We don’t know the answers to any of those questions: but it is at this point in the story that Joseph’s story prefigures a much greater one: the greatest comfort, perhaps the only comfort, for those who find themselves in this position is that **we worship a God who knows what it is like to be unjustly accused and mistreated.** Whose motives were condemned and whose actions were misinterpreted. Who was wrongfully arrested, illegally convicted and punished through the power of mob rule. Who, like Joseph, bore his disgrace silently and yet overcame. Whose suffering led to redemption and restoration. This is our Saviour: Jesus Christ. We worship a God who knows what it is like to live in such a world.

Not everyone in this situation finds such redemption in this life – but this is where we go to find comfort and strength. ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.’ Whatever your burdens, I can take it, because I know what it feels like.

In a few moments' time, we will share the ultimate gifts of Jesus' sacrifice, the fruit of his unjust trial. And yet it becomes a place where God's perfect justice and mercy meet. As we share it, may all of us who face such trials find hope and comfort. And may those of us who don't find courage to pray for those who do.

There is a wider perspective here as well. For all the achievements of William Wilberforce and the anti-slavery campaigners of 200 years ago, tragically human slavery remains as powerful an evil as ever: there are more slaves and bonded labourers now than at any point in history. What happened to Joseph is an all-too-common fate for people today: nothing has fundamentally changed in 4,000 years.

Our call is not just for ourselves but for those who have no voice. For those who still suffer as Joseph did. As we remind ourselves of the redemption Jesus won for us – the word means to buy a slave his or her freedom – may we all commit ourselves to continue to pray for those who need literal redemption today, that the Lord too would be at work, and that we would live and act for justice and freedom on behalf of those who cannot seek it for themselves. Amen.