

## Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> November 2021 – Joseph (5) ‘The Forgiver’ (Genesis 45:1-15)

Most of us love a happy ending. Alise and I certainly do. Occasionally we’ll watch something more hard-hitting where all outcomes are on the table; but generally, it’s good to know that there’s light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes, we’ll get half-way through a series and realise that every character is dysfunctional and the finale is almost certain to lead either to a ridiculous bodycount or the baddies getting away with it, and we won’t pursue it to the end.

To which the cynic will say: ‘ah, but that’s not real life is it? Real life doesn’t always have a happy ending, so why should we crave it in our entertainment?’ I’ve had friends over the years who choose only to watch TV or films that wallow in a moral quagmire, where the good characters always meet a sticky end and where darkness reigns, because it’s ‘real life’. And to them I would say two things: **first, our need for a happy ending is not just weak escapism – it’s how we’re made.** We have this inbuilt longing for eternity, for wholeness, for something better. It’s part of what you might call the God-shaped hole. So when we crave a happy ending and breathe a sigh of relief at its arrival, we’re expressing something of what it means to be made in the image of God. There’s something to chew on this week!

**Second, sometimes even in real life we get the happy ending, too.** Today’s passage is a famous example of that. After years of setbacks, we saw last week how Joseph’s own fortunes turned around. This week, in our finale, he is also reconciled with his brothers. Or rather, it would be fairer to say that his brothers were reconciled to him.

This raises the awkward issue of forgiveness. **The idea of forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith.** We will shortly be commemorating our own forgiveness by sharing bread and wine, and rejoicing at God’s love and mercy. **And yet we also know that forgiving others is incredibly hard to do.** Some of us have huge things to forgive. Others perhaps only smaller things – but either way, no-one finds it easy.

It’s hard to know how costly it was for Joseph. Certainly he found the encounter with his brothers overwhelming: twice in the intervening chapters since our last episode he has to go into another room and weep, lest he give the game away in front of them. He has had 20 years to prepare for this day, and there must have been dark times. But we can make some important observations by looking at Joseph’s experience, which apply to forgiveness generally:

**First forgiveness is unexpected.** It was extremely rare for Joseph to do what he did in his culture. But it’s not necessarily that much more common today. As humans living in a fallen world we are wired for revenge and retribution when we feel wronged. Joseph had all the power in this encounter: he was the ruler of a nation, he had servants and soldiers at his disposal, he could have taken whatever revenge he wanted. But he chose reconciliation over revenge: that was unexpected.

**Second, forgiveness is undeserved.** And this is true most of the time. Very occasionally someone will do something lovely to make it up to us: but most of the time, we face the challenge of forgiveness without that quid pro quo.

Joseph's brothers in this story certainly couldn't do anything to put things right: their crime was serious and life-changing, and now they find themselves needing a favour in return. When Joseph forgave them, it could only ever be undeserved.

**Third forgiveness is unconditional.** Joseph forgave his brothers and demanded nothing in return but their love and friendship. And again, however costly, this is how forgiveness must be. Whilst we might hope for change, forgiveness has to be offered, and received, in trust. In the eyes of the law, there maybe punishment, and that will be for others to decide. But in the eyes of the forgiver, unless forgiveness is unconditional it cannot really be forgiveness, only another diluted form of justice or retribution.

**Finally, forgiveness is unsurpassed.** There is *nothing* as wonderful as being forgiven. Here, a family is reconciled and given hope and a future. For all that forgiveness is unfair and undeserved, it is a wise person who observed that the only thing worse than forgiving someone is not forgiving someone, because you pay twice – what you experienced in the first place and then the burden of rage or resentment you have to carry around afterwards.

**For all that, let's never suggest that forgiveness is easy or cheap. It is profound, and costly.** And here in the story, we can see the weight of the family history working itself out over some period of time. We missed out chapters 42-44 to keep the story to a manageable length, but if you have time to read them, you'll see a long sequence of events unfolding. At first sight it looks like Joseph is exacting some sort of retribution before he finally forgives, but in fact the opposite is true.

What Joseph does is designed to help his brothers face what they'd done. Whilst Joseph presents as quite intimidating, what he does is bless his brothers rather than punish them, which they find unnerving, and starts them considering the aftershocks of what they did all those years ago. Then by planting the cup in Benjamin's sack he gets them to face what unjust punishment looks and feels like: a clear replaying of what had happened to Joseph 20 years before.

Only then does Joseph reveal his true identity and there can be true reconciliation. Now the brothers can fully grasp what they did, which also means that their repentance is real and their reconciliation can be deep and not just superficial.

**Above all, what allowed Joseph to forgive was a clear sense that God was in his circumstances,** that, despite the dark times and the injustice, good had come out of it. Joseph's wound became the source of his capacity to heal others. Perhaps his desire to feed the people was motivated as much by knowing what it was like to be hungry and overlooked as by a general sense of decency. 'You sold me,' he says to his brothers, '...but God sent me.'

Not all of us can see the hand of God as clearly in our struggles and suffering. But we too have the opportunity to seize by faith that, somehow God *is* in them, even in some unseen way.

Forgiveness unlocks something in our souls that allows God's Spirit to move with great power. As we remember in a few moments' time what it cost Christ to win our forgiveness, may Christ grant us grace to be able to forgive, as we have been forgiven. Amen.