

Sermon 10 August 2014
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 'Troubles – God-Trust'

Prayer: Lord of endings and new beginnings, we encounter you amidst our broken world. You invite us into spaces of brokenness – into these cracks, through which the light shines. Thank you for the gift of your presence, even through the difficulty of the unknown and scary we know we can trust you. Amen.

'Troubles and God-Trust' is where I have wandered in my reflections about our two Bible readings this week. Trouble in the life of Jacob (still) and his favourite son, Joseph; and trouble for the disciples who were being tortured in the boat by waves of the ferocious sea (lake) raging around them. God-trust for Joseph who as a 17 year old is sold into slavery by his big brothers and God-trust for the disciples (growing church) and Peter in the trials of establishment in a hostile environment.

Last week we left Jacob / Israel about to seek reconciliation with his brother Esau. He found that Esau was prepared to make room for him, within the family *again*. Esau greeted him with a kiss and weeping and words indicating he, Esau is satisfied with his current life. *There is possibly still some level of tension in this final meeting. Esau suggests they travel together (v. 12) and suggests he leave some of his people with J/ Israel (v. 15) whether for protection or surveillance is not stated. In the end, however, the brothers go their separate ways (vv. 16-17).

Then today we are introduced to Joseph as the favourite son of his father Jacob /Israel. This is no minor issue because Joseph is the son & only child of Rachel, his father's favourite wife. So our story opens with the smell of trouble, a theme that is already familiar to us: **favouritism, family division and dissention**. It is not long before tension arises between Joseph and his brothers. **He** gives a bad report of them to their father (v. 2). **His father**, in turn, is said to **love him more** than the others (v. 3) and favours him with a special coat (one with long sleeves, *not necessarily* multi-coloured as tradition has it). This leads to hatred between the brothers (v 4). Remember the earlier stories in Genesis? Especially the divisions between Isaac and Ishmael (Gen 21:8-14), Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25 and 27), all of which are traced back to parental favouritism. The brothers are further enraged when Joseph has dreams in which the whole family bows down to him (cf. vv. 5, 8, 11). The stage is **set** for the dramatic events which follow.

J/ Israel sends Joseph to find his brothers who are looking after their father's flocks in Shechem. When he finds them, they are in an even more isolated area, with no one else around. The bro's envy gets the better of them and they seize the opportunity to get rid of this annoying young brother. At first the brothers plot to kill Joseph and then throwing him into a pit. They will tell Dad / Jacob a wild animal has eaten Joseph. This plot is *foiled* by the eldest brother Reuben, who persuades them *not to kill Joseph*, but to just leave him in the pit, the dry well. The narrator says Reuben intended to come back later and rescue his brother.

So when Joseph arrived, they threw him into the pit and left him. Then as the brothers were eating (and Reuben presumably absent) Judah persuades them not to kill Joseph, but to sell him to Midianite traders travelling past with some Ishmalites. So they sell him for **twenty pieces of silver**: nb: to the descendants of Abraham from his wives; Ketura, mother of the Midianites and Hagar, mother of the Ishmalites. cV

Trouble indeed for Joseph, inherited and created broken relationships which had consequences well beyond any of the players understanding. We know how it ended, but at the time? At the time what they had was God-Trust, exactly what the disciples had and actually all we have, sometimes nothing much changes! God-Trust is very delicate, unbelievably precious and yet strong enough that it is never broken, only let go of. By that I mean God, Jesus, Spirit **never break trust with us** – *we let go* of holding on to what seems too fragile, weak and even useless in the face of our trouble.

We are wrong of course – but no matter how mature in faith we are, trusting the Lord is one of the most fertile grounds for doubt and despair, even evil to be planted and grow. Doubt and despair are not of

themselves against the Lord, or God or the Spirit – nor are they evil – only if we let them become dominant and dictate the terms of our faith and trust in the Lord. *Paul Tillich, 20th century* "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." Jesus and Peter: **31** Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

When the things that would pull us away from God-Trust are *greater* than our faith, we are in trouble! Double trouble, that can't be good for us, in fact we know is not good for us! I would put out a small challenge out for us to take on board, and that is often the troubles that torture us are often beyond our control, ie. the disciples on the boat. The trouble's we encounter that ***pull us away*** from God-trust are rarely beyond our control – and to face and deal with them we have the best help in the world – if we can get out of our own way. **If** we can move aside our pride, independence, self-sufficiency, our need to be seen to be better, or terror of not being seen as 'normal' ***because*** we have trouble in our lives!

It is hard – can be very hard when facing the sea of life's storms to hold out your hand for help - I guess the knowledge of imminent drowning might help! But asking for help in faith, spiritually, or prayer because our hold on that fragile looking thread of God-trust is slipping, **asking is all we have to do**. As soon as we ask, Jesus stretches out his hand and catches us – right in the middle of our storm. As soon as we ask, our community of faith will do its human best to provide a safe boat to climb into.

And when we have community around, the ferocity of the storm often/ sometimes/ always lessens. For the disciples in today's readings it stopped. But if we take a wider understanding from scholars that this story from the life of the disciples was also understood as referring to the **emerging church**.^{*1} The 'boat' being a symbol of the church. *Navis* is where we get our word for both "nave" the sanctuary of a church- and "navy." The boat of the church faces difficulty from doubts, despair even from evil, which is all represented by the tormented sea in the middle of the night. The early church was "sailing against the wind." What was it to do? *Frederick Buechner, 21st century*: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." Therefore I would add – alive – maybe wet, tired, scared... but alive!

Yes, there have been moments in its history where the Church 'boat' has had calm waters and when it has it has very nearly died! The biggest reforms have been when the church 'boat' has been under control of the 'sailors' and not in the middle of a sea storm strong enough to torture and terrify its people. The more usual situation of the church from the very beginning is 'trouble' / a storm / or torture which is how^{*1} one scholar translates the usual 'terrified' state of the disciples. Whether it is our own personal life – of that of Christians in Palestine or in the city of Mosul, (which has absorbed the ancient city of Nineveh of Jonah fame), when trouble arises – and the storms hit we have a choice to let it overwhelm and we sink in despair, doubt – or we get going. Christians in Mosul are having to flee after thousands of years... cV

According to Hare, today's Gospel story "graphically depicts what it means to be a Christian caught midway between faith and doubt" (*Matthew, Interpretation*). Are we willing to let this story speak into our lives about those times when we recognise we are midway between faith, a holding on in trust, and doubt, our being encouraged to let go? Hare would remind us that faith "speaks of realities that are of more ultimate importance than the things we can see and touch. To believe in the saving power of Jesus is to take a risk, Faith is not a possession but an activity – like a song that disappears when we stop singing." cV

We live in the middle of a materialist and scientific culture, what does it mean to "believe in the saving power of Jesus"? Yes, we can say that it refers to going to heaven, but it also says much more; this short phrase has more layers, more depth, of meaning than that. This story about a storm in the night, about human fear and the reassurance of Jesus, and it relates to our lives here and now, to the life of faith day in and day out. This is so that **when troubles hit** – whether from family or soldiers we hold tight to God-trust because like Joseph and the disciples we don't know the consequences God needs to have happen in the future through us. Amen.

*H Wallace^{*1} JPetty,