

Thought for the day 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020

Today we find ourselves in a world in turmoil. The sun is shining (mostly) and the weather such as we'd book for our holidays. Families are together (unexpectedly) but it is due to having to deal with the terrible pandemic and not just because being with one's family is a natural and desired state of existence.

We have got used to having to put family too often as second fiddle to the needs of the world around us, telling ourselves that without doing this we cannot "do right" by them. Sometimes it is little things that we think go unnoticed and sometimes they are much larger things that cannot be disguised and hidden, and we hope that "the family understands". But even if the family does "understand", both we and they are poorer in spirit for those choices. The example passes down to the children, consciously or otherwise, and perpetuates to the next generation, and so on. Eventually one ends up with a society which has lost much of its innate love and compassion, its empathy with and sympathy for those who are affected by our choices and those situations we can see in others arising from the same causes. We convince ourselves that "it's OK, we mean well, and everyone will understand". But in truth we have avoided making hard decisions to save our own feelings.

So it is with being Christian. We've never been promised that following Christ will be simple, easy, straightforward, and without conflict and danger – why then do we still hope that the reality will be easy, calm, nice to all....? What we have been promised is that if we honestly and faithfully follow Christ, recognise and correct our faults and sincerely repent our failings and *errors, then we have* a hope of being with him in the life to come.

The readings today, both feature the reuniting of Joseph with his brothers. Joseph fell foul of his older brothers who envied the way his father Jacob (Israel) treated him. This got to such a pitch that they waylaid him, took his coat of many colours and sold him into slavery in Egypt, using the coat as proof to his father that, by its condition he had been set upon and was dead. As we know in the story, he kept his faith and God worked through him elevate him in the eyes of the Pharaoh and thus to bring a better life to the people of Egypt to begin with.

Once he had become very senior in Pharaoh's court, he reached out to his brothers during a time of famine in their grazing land. In an act of amazing forgiveness, compassion, and sense of family, he then revealed himself to them, letting them know he wasn't out for revenge – quite the opposite – and

reconciled with his Father, his brothers and their families. He then persuaded Pharaoh to let all the tribes relocate to Goshen, which is adjacent to Egypt, and was not under famine and this would be to the benefit of both nations. This state of harmony existed into the time of the next Pharaoh where things were not so good as the Egyptians felt outnumbered by the Israelites and this led to the situation where Moses was put into a reed basket to save his life and the whole story of the Exile of Israel from Egypt.

Apart from being a great example of forgiveness and reconciliation as the best way forward to ensure the benefit for everyone as opposed to anger, hate, envy, strife, and greed which are divisive emotions and do not bring a community together for the good of all – particularly within a family which itself is no guarantee that all is “sweetness and light” - this story was very important to the Hebrews as the “family” involved was Israel (Jacob) himself and his sons who were the Patriarchs of the 12 tribes. It couldn't be more fundamental to the Hebrews as a message that they were family and must get along with each other and that the best existence is when they lived in harmony with those around them. Even the Egyptians who had been historical rivals for land and wealth.

In Acts 7, St Stephen had been preaching in Jerusalem and a number of the priests had “become obedient to the faith”. He was brought before the council of Elders, as they had brought false witnesses against him saying that he had spoken blasphemy against Moses and

God, and charged him that Jesus of Nazareth had said he will destroy this place and change the customs of Moses handed down to them.

St Stephen reminds the Council that Abraham, and his sons did not originate in Palestine. That the country in which they now lived was not given to them as a heritage, but to their descendants {Israel and his sons and families} who would be “resident aliens in a country belonging to others. That they would be treated harshly and God would deal with their oppressors and that is the story of Joseph and his brothers. This was the first covenant with God and was marked by the circumcision of men.

St Stephen was also reminding the Council of Elders that the covenant was still in place. That the very behaviours of the elders and the Pharisees were not fully compliant with the covenant and weren't living in amity with themselves never mind the surrounding nations. However, at no time has Jesus or anyone of his disciples Spoken against God or Moses but had reminded them all along of the

Covenants between God and his people and that each time they had deviated from the path he had “chastised” them.

The example of reconciliation and forgiveness implicit in the story of Joseph is as true for us all today as it was back then. Today we have a complex society of strangers which is struggling to be inclusive and embracing equality in all areas and which is being unravelled by the uncaring Covid19 virus, and as a consequence many people have become “adrift” from the touchstones in everyday life that gave them a trusted view of society.

Now, more than ever before, we need to embrace the concepts imbued in traditional “Family values” even when dealing with others outside your immediate “blood” family. There are any number of songs about “The family of man” but we don’t usually think in a wider context than our own kith and kin. Now is the time to reflect on this, particularly when we are reminded that the extent of equality too easily becomes selective – and the commandment to “Love thy Neighbour” has no conditions or caveats.