

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 17 September 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Exodus 15.1-13, 17-18; Genesis 50.15-21; Romans 14.1-14; Matthew 18.21-35

During last week's sermon, I suggested that whilst the immediate context of any given passage was important for our understanding, there is a broader context also which we must consider when we read our Bibles, I concluded that this broader context was simply God's love for us which is revealed primarily in the person of Jesus who embodies God's new creation, the Kingdom in which love reigns.

Inevitable this leads us into other questions how is God's love manifested? What does it mean to say that God loves us? We sing about it easily enough and some folk talk about it, though sometimes rather flippantly, what do we mean. Again, we need to engage with the overarching Biblical themes of exile and covenant and reconciliation, not as one-off events that we might read about in Biblical stories as we did this morning in the story of Joseph and his brothers but as ongoing, as the way we live together, as the way that we *are* together.

Consistently in the gospels Jesus is involved in acts of reconciliation, in his very person he is the embodiment of reconciliation. The way things are, and the ways are meant to be, meet in him, in his humanity and divinity. We ask the wrong the questions when we think about Jesus' healing miracles, we ask how, rather than why. Jesus healing always involves, restoration, forgiveness, and reconciliation. We puzzle over this sometimes the connection between sin and sickness; does this mean I am sick because I have sinned. Well, few of us do all that we can to care for our bodies that is true, but Jesus doesn't enquire about our diets or the number of standard drinks we consume every week, his healing is that of our human nature of which sickness is but a part. In Jesus' healing there is always something else happening, that the religious folk of his day didn't quite understand – and neither do we. Go, he says to paralytic, your sins are forgiven; his healing is sign of restoration, of reconciliation he shows us the way things are meant to be.

God's love then is clearly wrapped up in this idea of forgiveness. Not just in those one off events of life in which we seek forgiveness or forgive others when they wronged us, although clearly that is part of it, but as a way of life in which reconciliation, one with another and with God is our MO, the theme of our life, the embodiment of God's love. So, when Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive someone seven times, Jesus rather enigmatically quotes the seven times table. He doesn't want Peter to crunch the numbers he wants him to engage in the love of God. In the book of Daniel, the prophet asks how long the exile is going to be: will it last for seventy years? Back comes the answer: not seventy years, but seventy times seven. It is too easy to say that Jesus thinks that Peter is simply wrong. Few of us cope well with having to offer forgiveness for the same offence, it is the way it is. Jesus knew that text from Daniel and what he wants from Peter and the others is a broader vision, not just the way things are but the way things are meant to be, the way of the Kingdom – the end of the exile, freedom, liberation from the need to keep track of wrongs, and this is where this text is important for us today.

At last weekend's sitting of the Diocesan Synod, we considered a motion regarding the recognition of indigenous peoples in the Constitution. Following debate, a motion was passed that the Synod affirms and supports the establishment of the Voice. But the vote was close, the floor of synod was fairly evenly divided. Indeed, the chair asked that we be counted such was the closeness of the vote. This says something about the issue before us and the need to deal with this issue in a way that does not separate us further.

I don't think we can say that some folk on the floor of Synod chamber were wrong, that's far too easy, and it leads down a path to the acrimony that we are experiencing in this debate. But I do feel that what we experienced were two different ways of thinking and the call is to reconcile these ways. On one side of the debate are the practical types, a little like Peter. They are interested in the practicalities and the law. They acknowledge the Kingdom but would claim that

it has not yet fully been realised and we must deal with the world *as it is*. On the other are the those who want to live the Kingdom *now*. We live in between these two worlds.

I have in the past mentioned a book by Iain McGilchrist called 'The Master and his Emissary.' McGilchrist is both a brain scientist and a literary critic, it is an interesting mix and as such he brings a unique perspective to many ideas. McGilchrist argues, based on brain science itself, that our brains are designed to work in a two-way movement: from the right brain, with its initial intuitions, metaphors, visions, dreams, and imagination, to the left brain which works on the detail, the practical things and back to the right brain again. The right brain he calls the 'master', and the left brain the 'emissary.' McGilchrist believes that in many areas of thought today the left brain dominates. We are concerned with the detail, and we lose sight of the vision.

Both ways of thinking are important, but we need to allow our imagination, our vision of the Kingdom, the way things *are meant to be* to be the master. This is what Jesus is saying. Notice that the parable he tells us has about it just the whiff of the absurd. The first slave owes an amount of money that few folks in Jesus' time could even conceive of, the second slave owes a not inconsiderable sum, but almost nothing compared to the first. Jesus' description of one slave throttling the other over these amounts would have had imaginations running wild! Jesus compares our rather lack of forgives, or limited forgiveness at best with that of God. A forgiveness almost beyond our imagining.

Yes of course we seek forgiveness and in turn we endeavour to forgive, we have been taught to pray in this way in the Lord's Prayer. But these things are but a sign of something greater, the Kingdom of God, the kingdom in which God's love reigns. We can but glimpse it in this life, we live in the world *as it is*, yes, but it should remain our vision, a vision of the world *as it is meant to be*. A world reconciled that is how God's love is revealed. Amen.