

Readings for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

23rd February 2025

First Reading: Genesis 45:3-11,15

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50

Someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Gospel: St Luke 6:27-38

Jesus said to his disciples, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

A Reflection for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Every so often in life, we are fortunate to meet someone who has really embraced what it is to follow Jesus’ command to love our neighbour as ourself, or indeed, in the words of today’s Gospel, to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. I hope that you can all think of someone you have met or know well who has truly done that, but probably not many because, in my experience at least, they are rare flowers. And usually they are the first to deny it.

In today’s Old Testament reading, Joseph displays what seems to me an extraordinary degree of forgiveness towards his brothers who, through jealousy, had intended to leave him to die in the desert, but then decided to sell him into slavery, lining their own pockets in the process presumably. As a slave, Joseph did well, rising to a position of authority in his master’s house, but was then accused of seducing his master’s wife and thrown in jail. From there, his ability to interpret dreams eventually led to his release and powerful position in pharaoh’s household where he had control over the livelihoods and fate of many people, including, as it transpired, his own brothers. When they arrived seeking famine relief, I wonder what thoughts went through his mind? It would be only too easy, too human, to recognise that this was his opportunity for revenge, to pay them back for their treatment of him. And perhaps there was an element of this in his behaviour. Initially he accused them of being spies, imprisoned them, then retained one as a hostage while sending the others home with supplies and demanding that they bring back his brother Benjamin with them. When they eventually did so, Joseph planted a silver cup in Benjamin’s sacks and then accused them of theft. All quite a performance!

But then we come to today’s passage, the revelation of Joseph’s identity to his brothers and his words of forgiveness. His brothers had earlier acknowledged their own sinfulness in their treatment of Joseph, within his hearing, though they did not know it. Joseph has seen how rapidly the circumstance of our lives can change from good to bad and back again, and has recognised God’s hand at work in his life, bringing him to this point where he was in a position to save his family from starvation.

Joseph had a choice, and he chose to do good, despite the way he himself had been treated, recognising God’s providential care. We all face such choices, just as we all experience God’s care. The basis of how we should respond is summed in the Golden Rule, which appears in today’s Gospel: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’ Most faiths include something similar, and it’s a good maxim for a healthy society. But the specifics here are hard. We are to love our enemies, even if they don’t reciprocate; we are to do good to those who hate us; bless those who curse us; pray for those who abuse us; lend, or perhaps more accurately give, without expectation of repayment; to

help others and to not judge. Surely this is impossible.

It is worth remembering here that, in Biblical tradition, love had nothing to do with emotions, or attraction or otherwise to other people, or family ties. Love is an act of will. In the ancient Law, to love meant to be merciful, to be intentionally helpful, not just to neighbours but to the foreigners amongst us – they were also to receive the same sort of love and mercy as a native-born person (something worth bearing in mind in the current political climate). To love in this way is to imitate God's character. In this passage, Jesus is challenging his followers to trust God and to live with the same radical generosity of spirit that God bestows on us.

As I said, surely this is impossible. Well, yes it is ... but for one thing. None of us can manage to live as Jesus modelled without being transformed by God's grace and re-made according to his pattern.

This is the transformation that Paul is alluding to in the passage from Corinthians. Paul contrast what are sometimes referred to as the first Adam and the last Adam. The first Adam is humanity, taken from the dust of the earth and ultimately returning to it. The last Adam is the Christ of heaven, a life-giving Spirit. Paul says that 'Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven'. Made in the image of God, humanity has been marred by its own fallibility, but we can be transformed, we can be re-made in the image of Jesus. We are all works in progress.

As I referred to at the beginning, some people seem to be getting there quicker than others, those everyday saints we meet who already seem to embrace and show forth the love of God in their lives. And there are also those Saints with a capital S, perhaps St Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa, or many others who show us what it is live a life of compassion, mercy and love. These people are not different to us; they have only got so far with God's grace and that same grace is available to us. They help us to recognise that to live this way is possible, not an unrealistic dream.

Like us, Jesus lived in a society that was polarised and divided by many issues, and in an area that was under Roman occupation. He seems to be trying to get people to imagine how different it could be if all of them embraced a vision of God's kingdom and really loved one another. To think of a world in which these words of Jesus hold true is to glimpse that kingdom, a world redeemed and transformed. And, even now, God is shaping us for that time. Hard, yes. Impossible, no. By God's grace we can begin to live up to these ideals and, each time we err, we can seek forgiveness, pick ourselves up and try again. To follow Jesus is to keep doing that, trusting in his grace.

Last November, on a very snowy evening, some of us attended a talk here in Ullapool given by the Palestinian environmentalist and human rights campaigner Professor Mazin Qumsiyeh. Since then, I have been receiving emails that provide updates about his work. In a recent message, I was struck by the following statement:

'The road for peace and sustainability will not be easy for those who choose to obey their conscience. Yet that road is the one that you never regret taking. When humans reflect on a deathbed what was achieved in life it will not be about a job or house or car that matters; we reflect on how we worked to leave the world a better place than [we] inherited. So [e]very day ask who did I help today?'

Every journey begins with one step, then another and another. It need not be complicated. Surely this is an easy step for us all to take: 'Who did I help today?' or perhaps 'Who did I love today?'