

## Sermon 20170820 (Saint Margaret's UC, Mooroolbark)

*These Sermon Notes were used by the Rev Dr Barry Brown on Sunday 20 August 2017. They are in précis, rather than a verbatim-manuscript form and are not 'word-perfect'. Prepared in advance as 'notes for preaching', they may not reflect exactly what was preached on the day. Preaching is 'peculiar speech' – and is a dynamic form of communication that needs to be faithful to the Biblical text, open to the leading of God's Spirit, and mindful of the hearers who are present.*

### Introduction

Today's Old Testament reading is the 11<sup>th</sup> and final passage from the Book of Genesis for this year. Most of the stories have been about the Hebrew patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (with Sarah, Rebekah, Leah & Rachel). We then heard about Joseph and his many-coloured coat – and Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. Today we found Joseph holding high office in Egypt when his brothers come in search of food. It is a kind of 'happy ever-after' like story as Joseph welcomes and forgives his brothers and promises to provide food and land for the whole family.

However, this story is intended as a **prequel** to what is to follow. We are about to spend a further nine weeks hearing the story of the Exodus. Today's reading is both a prequel to the Sacred Story of the Exodus and a bridge between the first two books of the Hebrew Bible.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann helps to explain what's going on:

"Joseph tells his brothers exactly why he is willing to act in such a generous, unexpected way. He says it three times so they do not miss the odd point:

**God sent me before you to preserve life (v 5).**

**God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant (v 7).**

**It was not you who sent me here, but God (v 8).**

**God sent, not you, not I, God sent....** On that basis, Joseph embraces his brothers, gives them food, welcomes their father, gives them land, and permits them to begin a new life under his protection.... He is saying:

**My life is larger than I imagined, and I decided to embrace that largeness that is God's gift for my life. I acted differently because I acted in ways befitting God's odd way with my life."**

If we look for a moral in this part of the Joseph story we need to look beyond family relations, forgiveness and generosity. We need to be aware that in the sacred stories of God's people there is a bigger story – and in this we are each called to play our part.

In our Introduction to Exodus we noted there are **four key interrelated themes: Liberation, Covenant, Law, Divine presence**. Exodus is not a story about Liberation *per se*. It is about Salvation – Liberation from bondage and deliverance **into** the dynamic of a God-given new identity through Covenant, Law and Divine presence.

When I chose the hymns for today I deliberately looked for those which used the words: Saviour, Salvation, Save. This was not hard to do as so much of our church language features these words and concepts. The Bible is full of these words too. I did a quick word-count and found at least 573 direct references in the NRSV.

Now the reason I am focusing on this theme of Salvation, Saviour, being Saved, is that this is precisely what the Book of Exodus is all about. It introduces the notion of God, or God's agents, being the one who saves, who brings salvation/deliverance. This is at the heart of the *Sacred Story* of the Hebrew people. It is also the heart of the Christian Gospel which declares God's salvation through Jesus Christ.

I wonder if you have ever been asked the question: Have you been saved? Perhaps at your front door, on the train, at church? Most Christians will confidently answer, Yes. **But have we considered, deeply considered, what this actually means?**

My observation is that 'being saved' means different things at different times. That is, the notion of salvation (being saved) is dynamic and depends upon God who alone is the Saviour of the world. Let me explain this briefly:

In the Exodus story – the *Sacred Story* – it is God, through Moses, who saves the Hebrew people from Pharaoh and a life of slavery in Egypt.

Throughout much of the Old Testament the leaders, prophets and kings, seek God to save them from the aggression and bondage of other nations and their gods and idols.

The prophets of the Exile called upon the people to turn to God who will be their Saviour, saving them from the bondage of exile and separation from their homeland.

Mary, on becoming aware of her roles in being the mother of Jesus, exclaimed: "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...*" The **Magnificat** concludes: "*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.*"

When the baby Jesus is taken to the Temple eight days after his birth there are two elderly people, Simeon and Anna, who had been waiting for the consolation of Israel. And Simeon praised God: "*... my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles, and for glory for your people Israel*".

In the Gospels we detect yet another cry from the Covenant people – freedom from the dominance and occupation of the Roman Empire. In the synoptic gospels the good news was of the Kingdom of God (Matthew = heaven) in contrast to Rome. In John, salvation is to be saved from Death to Life.

The careful observer might notice, at this point, there is a subtle change – from the corporate notion of salvation to the more personal or individual transformation. This should be noted, but not overstated. It is mainly a matter of emphasis, as salvation always has both a corporate and personal dimension in the Scriptures. Yet, in the history of the Church, the focus does tend to become more personal than corporate.

Martin Luther (500 years ago) was faced with the fear of sudden death and the threat of purgatory and hell. Salvation, for Luther, was all about discovering personal salvation through God's grace.

Just over 200 years later than Luther John Wesley preached a Gospel of salvation by God's grace and called for the crowds to "*flee from the wrath to come.*"

The earliest notions of what Christianity was about, for me, came from my grandmother, who was perfectly clear in that God in Jesus could save – save from hell (and from not going to heaven).

Protestant theologians have been helpful in bringing a better understanding – that salvation is about God in Christ saving people from **alienation** from God, or of **reconciling** people to God. They also stress that Sin (capital S) means to be separated from God; so to be saved from sin and death is not so much about being rescued from all the bad things we have done, as **re-connecting us with God through Christ.**

**Contemporary situations:** So what does this mean for us today? I simply touch on a number of things and then share with you a way of thinking that I have been exploring and find helpful.

**Globally – from Catastrophe.** Lord, save us from Donald Trump (USA) and Kim Jong-un (PRNK).

**Corporately (Church)** Recovering distinct identity for the Christian church as a minority part of Enlightened Age.

**Socially – from oppression, power, control** – being saved from self-interested powers of oppression (this has been the focus of Liberation theology). From Violent relationships, from family violence; from addictions and obsessions

**A Personal notion from writing my memoirs *Still Wondering*** - wrestling with what salvation means for me. Humans are made in the image of God and to be in a living relation to the Living God

*Let us make humans in our image*

Gen 1:26, 27, 31 *and indeed it was very good*

*What are mortals (ben Adam) that.... Ps 8:4-5)*

*Jesus Christ is the Image of the Invisible God...Col 1:15ff*

We humans are both animals and persons with divine potential

My particular personal interest in documentaries (human earth sciences)

Science, cosmology, biology (as well as history)

Attenborough – animals etc

Animal instincts and behaviours:

Survival (kill or be killed)

Food

Territory (eg Chimp wars)

Reproduction (sex drive)

Attraction

Dominance (usually the Alpha A)

Salvation is the rescue humans from being controlled by animal behaviour and instincts

Humans are at their worst are living by animal behaviours and instincts !!!

Humans wrestle with their natural (carnal) instincts/drive

Paul – conflict with inner self (Romans 7:14 – 8:1 - )

Salvation is being enabled to live in relation to the Living God

There is no condemnation – grace !!! (Romans)

And to be transformed by the Spirit of God

Being remade into the image of God (with the Fruit of the Spirit...)

**CLOSE – the Exodus themes for Christian living:**

*Liberation – by God's grace in Jesus Christ*

*Law – having the Mind of Christ*

*Covenant – living 'in Christ'*

*Presence – I am with you always (abiding)*

A Song I learned about 60 years ago remains a useful personal prayer:

*My desire to be like Jesus; My desire to be like him.*

*His Spirit fill me; His love o'erwhelm me;*

*in deed and deed word, to be like him. [Lillian Plankenhorn © 1946]*