

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 17 August 2014 – Year A  
Genesis 45.1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11.1-2a. 29-32; Matt.15.21-28

In the mid-1980s I spent three months at the Ecumenical Institute in Tantur, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. We travelled widely in Israel and in the Occupied Territories, visiting archaeological sites but also refugee camps, and we met some very impressive people involved in the peace movement, on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Many memories are etched on my mind from those months: good ones, like the beautiful rose garden of the Institute, cultivated by a local Palestinian; hard ones, like the Jewish father walking with his young son to pray at the shrine of the Machpelah in Hebron, where Abraham and Sara and other patriarchs are said to be buried, wearing his prayer shawl and a rifle slung over his shoulder; surprising ones, like visiting the excavations which revealed the wall built by Omri, father of King Ahab; magical ones, like watching a total eclipse of the moon from the roof of the Institute, a large round pale brown egg which hung there in the sky as if you could reach out and grasp it. And always the sense that this was a land fought over since time immemorial.

The Bible is inseparable from the land of Israel; geography and theology go hand in hand. Think of the epic journey of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt into Canaan. I did it more comfortably and the other way round, by bus from Tel Aviv to Cairo, through Rafah and Gaza and over the Suez Canal. In ancient times this coastal road was called the Way of the Sea, and, as the major trade route between Asia and Africa, was fought over and changed hands many times. It was probably the route used by Joseph's brothers as they travelled from famine-haunted Israel in search of food in Egypt. The story of how they had sold him years before to some Midianite traders and let his father believe that he had been killed by a wild beast has now reached its moving conclusion. Joseph knew them when they first came begging, but said nothing; now, on their second visit, he can contain himself no longer, sends everyone out, and weeps aloud, before he reveals his true identity to them. He is a powerful lord and could easily have avenged himself on them, but he does not. Instead, he asks them to turn from the bitter past and consider the meaning of the moment: 'Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, for God sent me before you to preserve life'.

It cannot have felt like that when he was first thrown into a pit and then sold; or when he was imprisoned because of the false accusation of Potiphar's wife against him. It did not feel like that to Jacob, as he looked on the bloodied coat of many colours and grieved for the loss of his favourite boy; or to the brothers, who had to live with the guilt of their actions. But there is theology at work in this narrative. It is not, however, a simplistic one which asserts that God will always turn the evil people do to one another into a blessing. I find it hard to accept that the millions slaughtered in the wars and genocides of the last century, or of this one, can be accounted for so easily. Its theology is subtler than that. First, you need to know the whole story before you can make sense of its parts; and second, it is shot through with as many paradoxes and contradictions as any of us may find in our own lives or in the conflicts which still plague the Middle East. It is in these that the story's theology lies, waiting to be teased out. The brother they sold as a slave is now the greatest man in Egypt after Pharaoh. They do not know who he is; but Joseph knows them, asking them always the same question 'Is your father still alive?' They stand before the brother they had abused so badly in need of his support so that they can survive. The irritating dreams of the young Joseph about his brothers bowing down to him have come true, though not in the way anyone could have predicted. Joseph himself has passed through two cycles of death and life; in the pit, and then in prison; but this dreamer is raised by Pharaoh when his skills as an interpreter of dreams are recognised. The raw ingredients are those of a biblical soap opera, only much more tellingly presented: family feuds and breakdowns in relationships; deceit, cruelty, greed; the desperate search for food when the rains fail; and shining through them all, loyalty, forgiveness and love, in Joseph's longing to know if his father and his youngest brother are alive, and in his refusal to condemn his brothers for their treatment of him in the past. But it's not spelt out; you have to find it in the twists and turns of the story.

The ending of one story becomes the beginning of another, because it explains how the descendants of Joseph and his brothers came to be in Egypt, were themselves enslaved long afterwards, before Moses led them on their difficult journey to the Promised Land. Suddenly we are at a point of conflict which is still unresolved and, in the latest outburst of fighting between Israel and Hamas, seems to become ever

more bitter and intractable. Another memory from my time at Tantur is how difficult Palestinian Christians found the many biblical passages which present the Israelites as the chosen race who dispossessed the Canaanites of their land and claimed it under divine promise as theirs. It was no good suggesting that biblical Israel and the modern state of Israel were not the same entity, or that God's promise of old came with conditions, such as dealing justly with everyone and having a special care for the stranger in the land. The great narrative of liberation, the Exodus itself, is hard for them to hear when they feel themselves to be hemmed in by walls of separation and without hope. In such a climate, the attraction of those who preach armed resistance and revenge is all too obvious.

Is there anything at all we can say about the latest bout of fighting between Israel and Hamas that neither calls into question Israel's right to defend itself against aggression or the Palestinian right to live in a free and just society? One of the classical principles of the just war, as set out by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century and refined by the Spanish jurist Victoria, often called the father of international law, in the sixteenth, is that only sufficient force must be used and civilians must not be involved. The staggering disproportion of casualties between the Palestinian and Israeli sides tells its own story, as do the bombs which fell in refuges. It is not enough to blame Hamas for using human shields. If you know that this is the case, you must adapt your strategy. Both Hamas and Israel have a serious moral case to answer; Hamas for firing rockets indiscriminately into Israel, and Israel for the scale of death and destruction its far superior weaponry has caused, especially among those who cannot defend themselves. Another principle is that the action you take must be likely to produce the desired result. This is the third outbreak of hostilities in this small and overcrowded part of the world in six years. Both parties seem more committed to continuing the work of destruction rather than trying to build peace.

Revenge and retaliation are instinctive human responses to acts of violence, but they only bring to birth more of themselves. As one whose Jewish family suffered beyond imagining in the Holocaust, I find myself in a peculiarly painful position: I want Israel to be secure, but I cannot accept that its actions are proportionate or moral. The price in human misery is simply too great. Paul, interestingly, faced his own dilemma,

wrestling across three chapters of Romans with the question of what the coming of the Messiah means for those Jews who reject him. Has God broken his covenant with them or not? He finds a kind of answer, that in the end they will be welcomed into the kingdom, because God cannot break promises once made. Even that has been hijacked by so-called Jewish Christian groups of fundamentalists, who are trying to hasten the Apocalypse, and who are tolerated in Israel because they also support the expansion of its borders so that outstanding Old Testament prophecies can be fulfilled and the End come.

In all this mess, I take some comfort from the story of Joseph and his brothers. Broken relationships find healing because the powerful ruler has the moral guts to forgive his brothers' cruel actions and to reunite the broken family. I also take some from the encounter of Jesus with a feisty Canaanite – we might say Palestinian – woman whose daughter is possessed. First she bothers the disciples with her importunate shouting. When they tell Jesus about her he seems to exclude her, suggesting that his mission is limited to the lost sheep of his own people. When she comes to him, no longer shouting, she simply kneels and says 'Lord, help me.' There follows one of the most debated remarks he ever made, about food for children and dogs. Does Jesus take the conventional view that these outsiders are unclean, like dogs? Is he testing her? Or does he have a smile on his lips, as if to say 'You know what people like me are supposed to think of people like you.' I don't think that this can be a moment of revelation even to him, because seven chapters earlier he has healed the servant of a Roman centurion and has told those following him that he has never seen such faith in any Israelite as he found in this hated soldier. As with Joseph, you can only make sense of the details when you get to the end. Like the centurion before her, it is the woman's response – even the dogs lick up the crumbs from under the table – which is praised by Jesus as an example of great faith. Whatever the meaning of his remark, a social and religious boundary has been crossed, a relationship has been mended and a human need has been met. Lost sheep, children, dogs – call them what you will, Jesus will not turn his back on any of them.

Can such things happen today, in Gaza, or anywhere else where ethnic and religious divisions cause people to take up arms against each other? Contrary to what we may

suppose, it takes more courage to make a stand for peace than to follow the herd as it cries for revenge. But there is no peace possible in a situation like Gaza without a serious attention to the issue of justice: Israeli settlements on occupied territory, for example, or political ideologies predicated on the extinction of the state of Israel. The blame game has to give way to the much more demanding work of finding common ground. The cycle of violence has to be broken before the breeding-grounds of terror will give way to signs of hope. We have some evidence for how that can happen, when those who have taken up arms come to realise that only a political process can deliver the beginnings of a just peace. We have seen the process at work, however slowly and gradually, in Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and South Africa. But we must also recognise that it is much, much more difficult to work for the resolution of conflicts than it is to stoke their fires with fresh outbursts of violence. It can also be dangerous, to reputation and even to life. Those in Israel today who continue to strive for reconciliation may be labelled cowards and traitors. But they are the true heroes of the moment, sowing seeds of hope for a future they may never see.

Perhaps all this helps us to understand the way of the Cross a little more easily. Biblical witness tells us that broken relationships can be mended, but only when the instinct to strike back gives way to a more generous spirit, like that of Joseph in that moment when he reveals not just his true identity but also a way forward to the healing of old hurts. Jesus himself took precious little notice of society's conventions and boundaries, especially when they trapped people in despair. His example was too disturbing for those who took pleasure in labelling others as sinners or outsiders, and they exacted their revenge. When we claim that it is by his wounds that we are healed and by his bloodshed that we find peace, we are not taking refuge in paradox or piety; we are acknowledging that if you follow his story to its end, you will discover that human rage can never put out the light of God, despite all our darkneses. More than that: the ending of his story, written in agony and death, is the beginning of another, calling us all, everywhere, to make room for the miracle of this new life, even though the wilderness stretches before us as far as the eye can see.