

Readings set for Sunday 24February

Genesis 45:1-11, 15;

1 Corinthians 15:35-8, 42-50;

Luke 6:27-38.

Woodstock

24 February 2019 (OT 7)

10.30 a.m.

I wonder how many of us here are enthusiasts for DIY? Or very much not enthusiasts for DIY? To be honest with you, I'm not. My Dad trained as a carpenter, and I always thought that my total lack of technical proficiency was a bit of a disappointment to him, though he never said so. But a couple of weeks ago I set myself the task of assembling a flatpack bookcase, and, although I say it myself, I did pretty well. After a couple of hours of sweat and toil – OK, it said that the job should take fifty minutes, but I was working slowly and carefully – after a couple of hours I had something that really did look like a bookcase. I'd reached step eleven out of twelve in the instructions. And could I understand step eleven? No, I couldn't. Comfortingly, neither could the people in the furniture department of John Lewis', when I called in for advice. So they had to send for a technician. And the story has a happy ending, I'm glad to say.

Sometimes when I pick up the lectionary or open the Bible, I'd like to phone a helpline! Sometimes I read the Bible passages set for a given Sunday and I wonder what they're about, and how they fit together, and how they connect with our experience of life and faith. Today's readings felt a bit like that, and I dreamed of calling lectionary customer services and asking for a technical expert with a sermon! But then I had a closer look at the readings, and I want to suggest to you that they offer us three fundamental affirmations, each one of which connects with a question we may well find ourselves asking, and each of which leads to a quality of character. And, from those qualities of character, I can give you the sermon in just three words: faith, hope and love. But now I'm going to give you some more words explaining why!

The first affirmation is this: **God is working his purpose out, in our world and in our lives.**

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When I was small, I had a Children's Bible. As I remember it, it was a really substantial book, and inside were a selection of Bible stories, Old Testament and New Testament, with the text on one page and a full colour illustration on the facing page. Thinking about it now, it would be very interesting to explore which stories were chosen for inclusion and how they were told, but my reason for mentioning it this morning is that one of the stories in my Children's Bible was the story of Joseph. The illustration, as I remember it, showed Joseph wearing his coat of many colours, since made famous by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Joseph, you'll recall, was a spoiled younger son who seriously antagonised his older brothers by boasting that one day they would all bow down to him. Annoyance turned to murderous jealousy, and the brothers sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. There he had lots of adventures, before rising to be Grand Vizier to the Pharaoh. And, at a time of famine across the Middle East, who should show up to buy grain in Egypt, but Joseph's brothers. In a story of great emotion and drama, instead of taking revenge on the brothers, Joseph discloses his identity and promises to look after them all. And that's the part of the story we read this morning.

In our reading, Joseph explains why events have taken the course they have. And this is what he says: 'God sent me before you to preserve life.' Actually, in just five verses Joseph says four times that God is behind it all – God sent – God sent – God sent – God made. A strong sense, then, of God's purpose at work through all the vicissitudes of his life. This enables Joseph to trust God, to have faith. He is confident that God's purpose is at work.

Does God have a plan for our lives? Well, yes, and no. Or no, and yes. Let me explain! Some people, people of faith, are very confident that God has every detail and contour of our lives mapped out in advance, and therefore that everything that happens to us is part of God's will for us. I find that very difficult to believe. I find it difficult, because I struggle to square it with human freedom and human responsibility. And I find it very hard to reconcile with God's justice and God's love. Going back to Joseph for a moment, did God want Joseph to be spoiled and to be obnoxious to his family? Did God want Joseph's brothers to be so resentful that they plotted to kill him? Did God want Joseph to be slandered and then thrown into prison? I don't think so! Did God work through it all, to bring reconciliation and to save life? Yes, he certainly did. I am absolutely sure that God is working out his purpose of love and healing in our world and in our lives. But I'm also sure that God doesn't do that

by micromanaging every detail or by manipulating us. We choose. Sometimes we choose badly. And sometimes other peoples' bad choices, or even their good choices, impact horribly on us. But God isn't defeated by that. God can redeem and heal and bring good out of dreadful things. That doesn't make the things any less dreadful. But they aren't the end of the story. So we place our faith in one who is at work in and through our mistakes, our limitations and our humanity.

Here's the second affirmation: **God is re-making the world and preparing a new Creation.** God is re-making the world and preparing a new Creation.

Since Christmas I've had the rare and slightly unsettling experience of far fewer evening meetings than usual. I'm not quite sure why! But it means that I've been scouring the TV schedules for some things to watch – not always successfully! We've found and seen a couple of really good programmes on the world's great rivers, one about the Mississippi and one about the Ganges. Amazing scenery of the most beautiful landscapes and incredible wildlife. But also plenty of evidence of the impact of human beings on a finely-balanced environment, with industrial pollution and all the rest. Where is the world going, we may ask? What will become of us, and of our world? It's easy to become very gloomy and very pessimistic about it all, and the political news doesn't help, does it?

This is the context for sharing a message of hope from Paul's first letter to the young church in Corinth. Now, at first sight and first hearing, this morning's passage from 1 Corinthians 15 may not have struck us as a great message of hope. In fact, we may have scratched our heads a bit and wondered what on earth Paul is talking about! It was quite a convoluted passage – evidently Paul was pretty steamed up, calling one of his Corinthian correspondents a fool – but what is going on here?

Well, Paul is trying to straighten out two misunderstandings in the Corinthian church. The first one is that Christians are enjoying now the fullness of all that God intends for his creation. In other words, that God's kingdom in its completeness is already here. We have 'arrived', and no further progress is needed. We may find that one very hard to understand, but in the heady atmosphere of charismatic Corinth, it seems that there were indeed people who believed that they were already in heaven, and it couldn't get any better. Strange, but true!

The second misunderstanding, linked to the first, is that the fullness of God's purpose doesn't involve our physical selves. For the Corinthian charismatics, what mattered was spiritual experience. Human bodies, human society and the world around us were unimportant – maybe even illusions. Not something to be interested in or concerned about.

Now, Paul's response to these two misunderstandings is to insist that God has more in store for his People and for his world than we're experiencing now – however wonderful the present may be! And that God's plan for the future entails not the abolition of physical life, but its transformation. That's the point of Paul's emphasis on resurrection. God is in the business of transforming the world. The resurrection of Jesus is the precursor and the proof of this. And what is to come is a general resurrection and a new creation.

I still remember a provocative speaker at the John Wesley Society when I was a student, many years ago now, asking if Christians believe in the immortality of the soul, and an unusually well-informed post-graduate theologian – now our Vice-President-Designate – replying that we don't, but rather that we believe in the resurrection of the body. He was spot-on, of course. The Christian hope is not about whisking people away from this world into an ethereal existence somewhere else. It's about resurrection and transformation here. So this world matters. We matter as whole people, body, mind and spirit. Our hope, and our concern, is whole and holistic.

And the third affirmation is this: **God is generous to all.** God is generous to all.

I wonder if you make lists? I certainly do! Shopping lists, of course. And weekly and sometimes even daily lists of things to do. I suspect that many of us do the same. Lists in notebooks. Lists pinned on the kitchen notice board. Lists in our diaries and on our calendars. Lists on the fridge. Some people even make lists of lists!

I suppose that the principal and obvious reason for making a list is to make sure that we remember something – so that we don't come back from the supermarket without the milk or the eggs; so that we don't overlook a family birthday; so that we don't set off on holiday and find at the airport that we've left our passports on the kitchen table. But there are other reasons for making lists, aren't there? One is to create a sense of order and control in a

world that often seems very complicated and very confusing. It's reassuring to have a sense – even an illusion – that everything is nicely organised into a list!

Those of us who like lists may also be drawn to tidy moral codes, to systems of belief and behaviour which set out very clearly our expectations and our obligations. Then we know what we're supposed to do, and what we're supposed not to do. It was probably someone who thought like that who went through the Law of Moses in the Old Testament and counted up 613 separate commandments in the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy. There are, apparently, 248 positive commandments – thou shalt's – and 365 negative ones – thou shalt not's. I've not checked, but I'm happy to take it on trust!

So, how should we live our lives? Is it about keeping the rules? Either the rules in the Old Testament or a new set of rules given by Jesus, like the ones we read in Luke 6? Well, no it's not. Jesus, you see, isn't really offering a list – a set of things for us to tick off. Rather, he is expressing an attitude – an attitude of heart, which responds to the exuberant and extravagant generosity of God. The key to the passage is in verses 35 and 36. God is kind and merciful to everyone, says Jesus. We are the beneficiaries of God's kindness and mercy. We are called to reflect those same qualities to other people, and so to show that we are God's children. We love, because God first loved us.

The vital things about this attitude of heart and mind are that we don't turn it into a new rule, and that we hold on to the governing principle of love. Loving another person might mean turning the other cheek, or it might mean not letting someone get away with violence – more likely the latter than the former, I suspect. Loving another person might mean lending someone some money or buying them a meal, but it might mean – probably will mean – not handing them cash to feed a drug or alcohol problem, but finding other ways to support them. Love is the fundamental point: receiving God's love; celebrating it; and showing it.

Well, I'm a couple of thousand words on now from faith, hope and love! But that summary still holds. Because God is working his purpose out, in our world and in our lives, we are called to faith, to trust. Because God is re-making the world and preparing a new Creation, we are called to hope. And because God is generous to all, we are called to love. May we so believe and so live. In the Name of Christ. Amen.