

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 3 (January 20-26)

Day 15: Genesis 37-39; Psalms 13; Matthew 13

by the Rt Revd Stephen Platten

Our readings today begin with the saga of Joseph, one of the most beautiful narratives in the Old Testament. Joseph's handsome appearance and attractive personality make others jealous. The interpretation of the dream which shows Joseph as master over his brothers is the final straw. He is thrown into the pit and left to die. Later he will thrive in Egypt and become the salvation of his family who become the model Israel. Christians down the ages have often seen Joseph as 'a type of Christ', one who suffers and then brings salvation. Our psalm echoes a similar theme – how long will we be forgotten and left to suffer? Despite feelings of despair, the psalmist remains faithful – he knows in his heart of God's enduring love.

In Matthew's gospel we read Jesus' parables describing the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. Of all the versions of the parable of the sower (it is there in Mark's and Luke's gospel too) this is perhaps the most elaborately drawn. Here Jesus is the teacher of the kingdom of heaven in all its richness. The same temptations and dangers seen in the Joseph stories are there and they are set in the images of the parable: evil can snatch away the seeds, people will not root themselves deeply in the life of the kingdom, but ultimately it is a gospel story, a tale of the good news, offered graciously by God in Jesus, bring forth fruit.

Here too is a feast of shorter parables, of the wheat and the weeds, of the mustard seed, of the yeast, the treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price. Each helps fashion a picture of the kingdom which Jesus himself inaugurates. The trials and temptations of our own lives are not far away in these vivid stories and they connect us with the gospel of hope.

QUESTIONS

- How can we offer hope to others as we read these vivid stories of Joseph and from Jesus' parables?
- Reflect upon the great variety of images of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew chapter 13 and see how this builds a three dimensional picture of God's will for us upon which we can place our own experience.

PRAYER

Father, through your gracious generosity we are created and redeemed, open our hearts to be channels of your love that our lives may be fashioned in the pattern of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 16: Genesis 40-42; Psalm 14; Matthew 14

by the Rt Revd Stephen Platten

We pick up the story of Joseph, with him now in Egypt. As in the earlier part of the narrative there are 'ups and downs'. Joseph's talent and wisdom always provokes jealousy and suspicion. So Pharaoh throws Joseph into jail. Not long after, however, his skill as an interpreter of dreams comes into its own again, this time advising Pharaoh himself. The interpretation sets out a strategy for the Egyptians to preserve sufficient food for their needs. Then follows the moving episode of Joseph meeting with his family, giving them a tough time and then relenting.

This entire narrative is part of a tapestry of 'wisdom' writing which weaves in and out of the texture of the Old Testament. The psalmist picks up similar reflections but in song form as part of the worship of God. Today's psalm implicitly contrasts wisdom with foolishness. The fool's lack of wisdom is rooted in lack of faith: 'Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."'

Faith and our lack of faith appears again as one of the themes in our passage from Matthew's gospel. Peter sees Jesus walking towards him on the water and attempts to do the same. Peter fails and Jesus speaks of faith in our relationship with God. Such faith

allows Jesus to nourish the hungry in the classical story of the feeding of the 5,000. This also looks forward to the eucharist, to the Last Supper and to God's feeding of all his people. Finally the terrifying story of the death of John the Baptist, shows how the faithful servant of God, endures even unto death.

Faith is at the heart of the Christian life and the experiences of Joseph, John the Baptist and Jesus himself tell us so much of how faith, worship and prayer can shape our lives and the manner in which we mediate that life to others.

QUESTIONS

- In which ways does the 'lens' of faith transform our actions and attitudes in the light of these narratives?
- In your reading of the Bible where else have you encountered suffering for faith and a response to that suffering?

PRAYER

Open our hearts, O Lord, and give us strength under suffering and wisdom to inform our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 17: Genesis 43-45; Psalm 15; Matthew 1

by the Rt Revd Stephen Platten

Yesterday's reading ended with the extraordinary story of Joseph's brothers finding the money they had taken with them to buy grain, back in their bags, when they arrived home. When they return for more grain, Joseph tricks them again, packing a silver cup in their luggage. Benjamin, the youngest son, is then to be held as hostage. Joseph breaks down with emotion revealing his true identity and sends them back to bring Jacob, their father. They are then given land in Egypt. The story's underlying message is of generosity. As with all the Joseph saga it is a tale about the goodness of God to his people.

Today's psalm is a well known piece of poetry. It describes the pattern of a Godly life. In Matthew's Gospel we encounter Jesus

in dispute with the scribes and Pharisees. The dispute is about purity laws, but Jesus uses it to pick up a similar theme to our psalm. It is not the flouting of laws of purity that are the key issue – instead, we are defiled by failing to live a Godly life. In contrast to those pious Jews, known to follow the law, the next story sees Jesus encounter a foreigner, a Canaanite woman. Her faith and her humble answer to Jesus' question mark her out as a true follower of him. These two contrasting tales take us into a second feeding, this time of 4,000 people, not dissimilar to the story we read two days ago about the 5,000.

One of the abiding truths about the Bible is how we learn of God's ways with humankind through story. The Joseph narratives and the gospel stories offer us a similar way of learning of God's love and of the life he would have us live. Today's psalm is a commentary on just this manner of learning.

QUESTIONS

- How is Joseph's trickery of his brothers still part of the generous tale of God's love?
- How do we square the Pharisee's true piety with the more radical command of Jesus about defilement?

PRAYER

Loving Father, you show your love for us through those who nurture us and care for us along the way, give us the generosity to allow that same love to pour out to others in the service of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 18: Genesis 46-48; Psalm 16; Matthew 16

by The Very Rev. Ian Markham

The tragic haunts every human life. We all have to cope with mortality, loss, and failed relationships. Learning to cope with the difficulties of life can be a challenge. One important feature of Scripture is the way in which the tragic is recognized. Embedded in the famous and familiar story of Joseph, we see human family

in all its complexity. In today's reading, a father is reconciled to a son he thought dead. And a brother is forgiving the rest of his siblings and providing land for the family to occupy. The drama is intense. Underneath the text is deep hurt and pain – feeling that to an extent we all recognize.

Our Gospel weaves together the tragic with Christian hope. The tragic is captured in the anxieties around having sufficient to eat (after all, the disciples did not bring along some bread) and the predication from Jesus that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Christian hope is captured in the powerful confession of Peter. Jesus in so many ways did not fit the classic Messianic expectations; but Peter gets it right and tells Jesus that he is 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. The tragic is intermingled with the hope. Indeed the hope partly depends on the tragic coming to past.

Scripture does not evade the reality of suffering. Like the Psalmist, we pray for God's protection and know that the protection cannot mean a 'pain-free' life or a promise of uncomplicated relationships. Instead protection means that we trust that God will be with us in the difficult times. It means that God supports us through the complexities of our relationships. It means that we find grace and hope even in the moments of deepest despair.

QUESTIONS

- Reflect on the tragic in your life. Search for the moments of grace embedded in those tragic seasons.
- Reflect on the question: 'who do people say that the Son of Man is?' Who is Jesus for you?

PRAYER

Loving God, we pause and remember the tragic moments in our lives. We offer the pain of those moments to you. Please enter into those memories and allow your hope and your grace to be present. Help us loving God to cope with all the challenges of being human. In Christ we pray. Amen

Day 19: Genesis 49-50; Psalm 17; Matthew 17

by The Very Rev. Ian Markham

Gathering around the bedside of someone dying is an important moment. This poem, where Jacob blesses his sons, plays a crucial role in the Genesis narrative. Here we have the fortunes of the different tribes anticipated. So the older sons have fallen out of favor and one of the younger sons, Judah, is described in very positive terms. The author of Genesis invites us to recognize how the past shapes the future; how decisions now can impact generations to come. The narrative stresses how interconnected we all are. For this author, Reuben's actions during his life (see Genesis 35:22) had an impact for centuries. The ripples from a certain action can extend a long way.

The past meets the present in a very striking way in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. These three disciples then witness the Transfiguration of Jesus, who is then joined by Elijah and Moses. Elijah is important as a prophet; Moses is important as the giver of the law. This is Matthew's way of letting us know that Jesus stands on the achievements of the past; Jesus is in continuity with the past. So in the same way that sin has consequences that can shape generations to come, so faithfulness and service to God can create opportunities for good in the future.

Jesus in this passage is very conscious of the passing of time. This is the second predication of his betrayal 'into human hands', which will lead to his death. He has so much to teach the disciples. The need for them to cultivate a faith sufficient to bring God's presence to difficult situation is stressed. Jesus wants us to grow in our relationship with God so we can be a vehicle for God's grace.

Every second that passes is a second that has gone forever. The invitation today is to reflect on the passing of time and use every moment to build possibilities that God can use in the future.

QUESTIONS

- What sort of things would you like to say to love ones when you near death? What is stopping you saying some of those things now?

- Think a little on your use of time. Set yourself the goal of using every moment for God.

PRAYER

Holy One of love and light, I give you this moment and this day. Please use every moment of this day for your glory. May your Son be seen in me; in the name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

Day 20: Exodus 1-3; Psalm 18:1-20; Matthew 18

by The Very Rev. Ian Markham

Children often have a hard time. When Jesus explains that real greatness in the Kingdom requires us to become 'like children', he was being deliberately shocking. Children are vulnerable and weak; they are easy to abuse and hurt. Jesus makes it clear that those who have the lowest status in society are much closer to being great in the Kingdom.

Back in the opening chapters of Exodus, children are the primary victims. Joseph has been forgotten. The leadership of Egypt has now turned the Hebrews into slaves. To continue the numbers, the Egyptians are attempting to eliminate male babies. So into this tragic situation, a young Hebrew mother places a baby 'among the reeds on the bank of the river'. Through God's grace, one child is saved.

Jesus is very clear about the value that God places on a child. To hurt a child is a wicked sin. Children have a special place in the Kingdom. The sense that everything around us is a gateway to the spiritual comes easily to children. Adults lose that sense of wonder and awe, children have it all the time. The miracle of a flower growing and the mystery of the stars are understood by children; adults can so easily take it all for granted.

It is a great gift and responsibility to care for children. Whether as a friend, parent, or grandparent, we are invited to strive to be a good and constructive influence on children. Today's Gospel

invites us to meditate on what we can learn from children. Perhaps we need to recover some of that childlike appreciation of this remarkable world that God has made.

QUESTIONS

- Recall your own childhood. Reflect on those moments when you learned about the world around us. Are you still amazed by the miracle of life and being?
- Think a little about your friendships with children. Spend a few moments thinking about how you can have constructive relationships with children.

PRAYER

Holy and Loving God, thank you for the gift of children. Help me to retain a child-like appreciation of this remarkable way. For Christ sake. Amen