

March 3rd 2024

Topic: Evangelism

Readings: Gen 50:15-21, 1 Peter 3: 8-18, Matt 5:38-48

For anyone who's recently joined us, we're in the middle of a Lent series on evangelism. In our churches, this sometimes raises unease, but this morning is really about the evangelism you can do when you're not doing evangelism! Relax, we won't be telling anyone to bail up strangers with personal spiritual questions, or to jump on a soap-box in the mall, unless you just love being extrovert! Today is more about our relationships and our responses to people who see how we handle adverse circumstances.

The Jewish-background people who read Peter's letter, and heard Jesus talk about how we treat the people we dislike, would have automatically plugged it into principles they knew from their own Scriptures. They might remember a young man called Joseph. He came near the end of a large and complicated blended family. He was the typical annoying younger brother. We only heard a short extract of his story this morning, but Joseph was a favoured, some would say spoiled, child. Among other things, he'd annoyed his brothers by insisting on reporting his dreams to them. These included such events as his brothers' sheaves bowing down to his own. They generally reflected Joseph's God-given, favoured status over them. Eventually, Joseph got too much for his bigger and stronger brothers. When they were working remotely on the land, grazing the family flocks, they weren't pleased when they saw him in the distance, coming to join them. In fact, they initially plotted to be rid of him by killing him. This was later modified to a plan to sell him to some passing merchants who were happy to take on a little slave trading as a sideline.¹ The seeming disaster for Joseph turned out to be the making of him. It also put him in a position where later, he was uniquely able to help many people. As Joseph's circumstances improved, those of his brothers declined. Joseph landed up making good in Pharaoh's court, and when he eventually meets his family again, their power positions have reversed. What's Joseph's take on this? When he has the ability to help people gripped by famine, even though some of them have been pretty horrible to him, he's generous. 'You might have intended harm, but God saw that it all worked out ok.'

These reversals of fortune happen sometimes, even in our relatively prosaic lives. In my working life I saw a few newbies come into their first job. Typically, a graduate music student who wins the audition and joins a professional orchestra sees himself as God's gift to music, rather than the other way around. He's going to show everyone how it's done. And typically, his new colleagues don't share this perspective. The old hands normally see it as their job to knock the newcomer into shape, traditionally using rather unkind tactics. But life's a funny thing, and if we fast-forward a few years, I've known it happen that in another workplace our newbie became the boss of one of these former colleagues. She had to hope that he had a poor memory, or a lot of grace. Like Joseph when life put him in the stronger position, if the new young boss resists the urge to score points off it, if he can graciously forget about past wrongs, that will be noticeable as different. If we don't get back at people when everyone knows we could, it may well win higher goals.

Today's gospel reading also endorses an unexpected way of relating to those we wouldn't choose as friends. 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,' says *Matt 5:45* 'Pray for those who persecute you?' Does Jesus realise that prayer's hard work? I don't want to expend my prayer-energy on someone who's been damaging me! There's more; 'If you greet only your own people, what are you doing

¹ Gen 37:12-36

more than others? Do not even pagans do that?'² Greet them? Do I feel like extending them the normal social courtesies? Not really. I'd rather avoid them. But if we're Christians and Jesus asks us to something, we should probably give it a go. Sometimes it will be a process, but we can be willing to start that. -Say we manage to do that. What happens then? It's when people see a Christian perspective in adversity they might wonder why. 'Do not be intimidated, but sanctify Christ as Lord. Give an answer to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope you have,' says Peter.

Our ultimate optimism comes from our foundational belief that Christ is Lord now, and forever.

As Jo said last week, the way things are now is not the last word. That changes our perspective on natural misfortunes that happen to us, as well as how we handle acts done against us by others. If a key person in our life is unpleasant, maybe we can consider seeing it as an opportunity for the gospel. Perhaps there's a difficult person living in our street, someone people either avoid, or gang up on. If we can be happy for our unpopular neighbour when he gets a new car, and be sad for him when the paint gets scratched by vandals, that divergence from the norm will be noticed. It seems to me that with the right attitude whatever others or the devil might intend for ill, God will indeed use in us for good. Peter, in his letter, suggests that people will notice something different about us, and we'll probably be asked why our take on life is different. He reckons it's good to have a line or two in your head for such occasions. This kind of responsive evangelism has a promising start, because we're answering someone's question.

I've been heavily influenced by time I spent, many years ago, in a workplace ruled over by a boss who often yelled at people in anger. Unfortunately, he was almost as important as he thought he was in the industry. His ideas about how everything should be done were non-negotiable, and sometimes irrational. Most people avoided him. When his colleagues engaged in general chatter about public entertainment or current events, and sometimes went out in groups after work, this man was never included. As a defence mechanism, he made out that he liked being aloof. But he started to notice that one of his young staffers, a bit braver or sillier than the others, didn't cut him out but respectfully listened to his opinions. He noticed that this person sometimes seemed to have a different perspective on life. One day, after he had sounded off at about his bad weekend, he asked this underling; 'Why do you bother with a grumpy old fogey like me? 'Because you're a person who is crossing my path right now. I would want your ultimate good, just because you're a person made by God,' was the answer.

That got quite a reaction from the beleaguered manager. It had been a long time since anyone had wished him anything positive. But the young worker believed we all have something of the God-stuff within us – remember God breathing into people at creation?

With so many of the passing encounters in our lives, we don't yet know the end of the story. I don't know whether that particular man kept asking questions. I don't know if he ever found out that Christ died for him too, and intends him to have eternal life. But it seems mathematically sound to suggest that the more interactions anyone outside of the faith has with ordinary Christians like us, the better the chances. When we're prepared to be a bit brave and a bit different towards others, it has to increase the likelihood that faith will grow in their lives too.

So we shouldn't feel guilty if we don't pursue an overt second career as 'Evangelist.' Just giving a genuine faith-based reason for the hope-in-all circumstances that is our inheritance, that is worth doing. May the way we live our lives spread the faith, as we reflect God's love and grace towards us, and all people. Amen.

² Matt 5: 47