

Just prior to becoming Minister here in Aberlady and Gullane I read a back copy of the Aberlady Church magazine in which John Stevenson recounted the history of his family coming to farm at Luffness Mains and of the planting of trees, many of which now line what is known as The Avenue; that portion of road connecting Luffness Mains to Luffness Mill. In the years since reading that piece I have travelled many times along that lovely stretch of road and I never cease to be grateful to those folk of past generations who dug in spindly saplings and nurtured them, knowing full well that they were very unlikely to see them grow to their full splendour. It was an act of faith and of generosity towards those of us who would follow them and, as such, should serve to make us stop and think about the marks we will leave behind. What will those marks say about us?

Today we are given the treat of focus upon two of the great narratives of the Jewish scriptures and upon two “stand out” elements of those narratives. The lectionary which we follow has, for some weeks now, been following the story of Jacob in the Book of Genesis and that is a narrative which will not come to an end until very near the close of Genesis, some 13 Chapters ahead. But today’s portion sees a key shift in the story of Jacob as he steps back somewhat and his son, Joseph moves to centre stage. Joseph will play a major role in the unfolding of the Jacob or Israel story, which is becoming less the story of a man – or even of a family --- and slowly becoming the story of a people – a race which will one day become a nation.

As soon as Joseph enters from the wings, the narrator highlights the fact that although he is one of Jacob’s youngest sons, yet he is his father’s favourite, the apple of his eye. That description carries, implicitly, the likelihood that he, Joseph might turn out to be a spoiled and arrogant child just as it does the probability that his brothers will be jealous of Joseph and resentful toward him. However, the narrator doesn’t leave such things to our imaginations; he expresses them explicitly when he says:

***But when his brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.***

Those who compiled the Revised Common Lectionary, which sets out the passages for each Sunday, suggest that at this point we should jump from verse 4 to verse 12 and it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect upon that suggestion. Verses 5 to 11 contain two of the dreams which the young Joseph had; dreams which have been long remembered. In one, Joseph and his brothers are gathering corn into sheaves to dry and ripen. Joseph tells his brothers that in the dream all their sheaves turn and bow to his sheaf. In the second dream it is the sun and the moon plus 11 stars which turn and bow to

Joseph's star. Even Jacob is disturbed by the clear suggestion that he and Joseph's mother will also, one day, bend the knee to this mere boy. Why are these verses omitted by the lectionary? Is it out of concern for brevity in worship services or is it perhaps because these dreams open up the possibility that the readers themselves will find Joseph [the hero of the story] somewhat arrogant and obnoxious and sympathise with the brothers as the narrative unfolds. We will never know what was in the minds of the compilers of the lectionary, but the omission is curious and unhelpful.

What happens next is well known. The brothers conspire to kill Joseph, but thanks to the intervention of Reuben they stop short of fratricide and cast him into a pit. Then, behind Reuben's back, the other brothers sell Joseph into slavery; concocting a tale that he has been killed and devoured by wild beasts. Joseph is bound and carried off to Egypt; another key turning point in the narrative.

As we contemplate the misery and dejected bewilderment being experienced by Joseph it is not a big leap to turn to another story of utter dejection; that of Elijah, who fresh from his triumphant victory over the prophets of Baal, on the mountaintop, has fled in the face of Queen Jezebel's furious resolve to see Elijah dead. Hiding away in a cave in the wilderness, Elijah is besieged by wild and dramatic storms; the wind, thunder and lightning paralleling his inner turmoil as everything darkens and closes in upon him. The narrator is clear to point out that God is not in the storms or the noise --- these agents of terror are not of God. Instead it is in the calm to which the storms give way, that God is found, unshaken by all the drama.

***"Why are you here, Elijah?"*** is the divine question. Elijah's dejection and defeatism begin to wither and before long he has new spirit within; a spirit of divine commission which includes anointing certain individuals who will be crucial to the continuing success of God's mission as well as the passing of his mantle to Elisha. Elijah will not much longer carry the burden as the days of his fulfilment are near. It is with a new spring in his step that Elijah leaves the wilderness behind and with restored confidence embarks upon the final chapter of his service to God.

Recently, I conducted a funeral of a man whose grown up children combined to pay eloquent and heartfelt tribute to their father. It was very moving. One of the qualities which was highlighted was the man's capacity for teaching others. He had a skill for never giving the answer too easily; but rather teaching his children how to go about discovering the answer for themselves. His children all enjoy a success in their careers which reflects the value of his method.

## Reflection for Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020

**Genesis 37: 1 – 28 and 1 Kings 19: 9 – 18 and Matthew 14: 27 - 33**

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It seems to me that this is very much the method of God. God left Elijah to experience the consequences of his actions because that experience would prove of great importance as he fought his way through the dark night of the soul to the light and hope which lay beyond. Thus, did Elijah come to understand and to execute his next commission from God. As we follow the narrative of Joseph, we see this same method at play. Gifted and destined though he is, the young, arrogant and thoughtless Joseph is far from ready to take on his role. He must be moulded and shaped by the refining fire of adversity and trial. Thus, does he discover how to fully appreciate and how to use his gifts in God's service.

Both Elijah and Joseph, by enduring their suffering, came through their fear and found renewed faith. It was not that God inflicted the suffering upon them; for that came from the actions and threats of others. Rather, God stood by them in their suffering and helped them to discover the way forward for themselves. Thus, did they become "standout" figures in the Jewish / Christian narrative. The Gospel reading for today, from Matthew Chapter 14, shows the Son of God using this same method to shape one of the great Apostles of the Church, Simon Peter. Jesus, walking by faith calls Peter to abandon the boat and come to join him. To his enormous credit Peter does, but he is almost overcome by his fear of what lay below. It was Jesus' faith which saw them both back into the boat. The same Jesus offers his faith to you and to me, every moment of every day. If we accept that offer wholeheartedly then we too can move beyond fear to a life of faith and of service. The mark which that will leave upon the world is a gift beyond all measure and all price.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen