

The Bigger Picture.

I reflected the other night at a meeting that we seem to live in two worlds. When we come to church and worship, we follow strict guidance on how to stay safe in relation to Covid-19, with social distancing, masks, hand gel etc. But when you go shopping you enter the free for all, with intermittent mask wearers, hit and miss sanitiser and no respect for space. And although this is a sweeping generalisation the two worlds are, on the one hand that which looks not just to self but to others (The Bigger Picture) and the other that looks just to self. (A selfie) Our readings today reflect a similar theme of the Bigger Picture which in this case is God's picture, rather than the limited horizons of humanity.

In our first reading we find in the final chapter of Genesis this sudden concern of the brothers, who fear that now their father is dead, Joseph will enact his revenge on them. A view that goes against the years of fortune and love that they have received under Joseph's protection. In what we know of the Joseph narrative we may agree with the brothers that Joseph was insufferable as a youngster, but that did not warrant the treatment that he received from them, and so they may feel that they do not deserve his forgiveness and love. But what would it say of the God that Joseph worships, the God who didn't forget him even in the darker moments of the story; what would it say of that relationship and its out working if suddenly Joseph at the death of his father exacts revenge? Where would the forgiveness and mercy that has been worked through in the time since they came back together be in such an ending? The bigger picture that Joseph points to is God's, because sin and the outcomes of sin can never have the last word in God's Picture.

In the parable of the slave in our gospel, we find the mind of the slave moving in the wrong direction. His burden of debt (billions in today's money) is removed, he now has the opportunity to now put his life in order, and part of that process is to set his own affairs straight. For him, getting his affairs straight is to call in those debts that led to his own. Surely such action would show a wisdom that his master would approve of. The slave though, missed the point of the master's mercy. The master was not just concerned for the slave, but for the wider society that he ruled, and here in waiving the debt of one, gave an example of forgiveness, from which the slave would learn and follow the example. The master's world view wanted to put more than one life straight by his action. Unfortunately, the out working of the Lord's Prayer didn't figure in the slave's mind. 'Forgive us our trespasses/sin/debts, as we forgive those who trespass/sin against us (are our debtors) ...' Which ever translation you want to use, the message is the same. There are also echoes for me of the relief adage, don't give the starving villager just a fish, give them a fishing rod as well. Here the master gave the slave not only forgiveness but the tools of forgiveness, but the slave missed the bigger picture and lost not only the gift of forgiveness but also at the end of the parable, the liberty that had been so graciously given and he was to show to others.

Paul's letter to the Romans has a familiar ring to it. How we love our groups and in particular those who think like me... whilst we deride those who think differently. Paul writes to a church that is clearly holding such groups, but he carefully and prayerfully works through, in typical Pauline fashion the big picture that can hold both. This passage could be seen as an endorsement of individualism and lazy liberal thinking. *'It doesn't matter what you do as long as you think it's alright.'* As the beetles sang, *'All you need is love...'* But Paul, like Joseph and the Master of the parable isn't saying that, he points to the bigger picture in which we live. Paul is saying this is not just about you and God, but about the great sweep of God's saving activity in Christ. While you squabble about feasting and abstinence, God is saving the world, and you need to be a part of his narrative with him, out there as part of the picture.

Our narratives today hold this common theme that it's not all about me and God. Yes, we know that what God seeks and desires is a 'relationship', a 'covenant' with us as individuals. But we also know that God did not create us to be just individuals but to also reflect that relationship one with another, to be community. The effect of God's love and forgiveness is not 'just' about me, but the knock-on effect of my transformed life, demonstrated in my relationship with the world around me. What we are called to do is to step out of the selfie photo and be a part of the bigger picture of God.