

Sunday 20 February 2022

A sermon preached by The Revd Canon Assoc. Prof. Bob Derrenbacker, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany.

Readings: [Genesis 45:16-26](#); [Psalm 37:23-35](#)

In our first reading tonight, we catch a glimpse of eleven verses from the larger narrative that tells the story of the patriarch Joseph in the book of Genesis. These 14 chapters conclude the book of Genesis, known narratively as the “Joseph Cycle.” In the Joseph Cycle, we hear a number of different stories that are perhaps well-known to us, stories about Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob who was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. These memorable stories include a teen-aged Joseph dreaming various dreams and interpreting them for his brothers, who then fake his death and sell him off into slavery in Egypt. Also memorable is the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife and his subsequent imprisonment; there in prison, Joseph interprets the dreams of his two fellow-prisoners, which leads to his eventual release to interpret the Pharaoh’s dream that predicts seven years of prosperity and seven years of famine for Egypt. Joseph, then, rises to power as the governor of Egypt at the age of 30, second only in power to the Pharaoh.

In tonight’s reading from Genesis, we drop into the Joseph Cycle after Joseph has been reunited with his brothers in Egypt. There, we hear the story leading up to the migration of Jacob (also known as “Israel”) and Jacob’s sons and their families from their homeland of Canaan to Egypt, what would become known to them as “the land of Goshen.” This migration comes at the invitation of the Pharaoh in our reading:

“Take your father [Jacob] and your households,” Pharaoh says to Joseph, “and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land.”

So, the brothers of Joseph return to Canaan, tell their father Jacob that Joseph is still alive and is now a ruler in Egypt, and the families of Jacob and his sons then migrate from Canaan to Egypt.

Genesis tells us that this migration to Egypt was due to an ongoing famine in Jacob's homeland of Canaan, so it makes sense why Jacob, his sons and their families would become refugees and migrate to Egypt, especially when the invitation comes from their brother Joseph, who is ruling alongside a friendly Pharaoh in Egypt.

But of course, this friendly and understandable migration eventually leads to the captivity and enslavement of the people of Israel a few centuries later. As the opening verses of Exodus put it, just after Genesis concludes: "...the Israelites were fruitful and prolific [in Egypt]; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ...[So t]he Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them" (Exod 1:7-8, 13-14).

Migration and dispossession from one's homeland are also in view in our psalm which we heard so beautifully sung for us this evening. Psalm 37 is an acrostic psalm, with each of the 24 letters of the Hebrew alphabet beginning a stanza in the psalm. In the particular portion of Psalm 37 we heard tonight, the psalmist instructs others about the Lord's protection of the righteous. The righteous are called to trust in the Lord, who will vindicate them and punish the wicked.

Our Psalm reads:

Depart from evil, and do good;

So you shall abide forever.

For the Lord loves justice;

He will not forsake his faithful ones.

The righteous shall be kept safe forever,

But the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

The righteous shall inherit the land,

And live in it forever.

[...]

Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way,

And he will exalt you to inherit the land.

In the Psalmist's view, the Lord has preference for the dispossessed, the landless and the homeless, is aware of their plight, and provides for them a promise of place, home, and land.

Place, home, and land are essential to what makes us human. To be denied place, home, and land is an injustice in God's economy and disturbs what God intends for humankind. As a result, to be denied place, home, and land is no different than being denied the basic necessities of life like food, shelter, clothing, and medical care.

The importance of the human experience of place and land is engrained deep in the Scriptures, going as far back to Abraham and the patriarchs, and then the people of Israel enslaved in the far-off land of Egypt. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it:

"Humanness, as biblical faith promises it, will be found in belonging to and referring to that locus [that place] in which the peculiar historicity of a community has been expressed and to which recourse is made for purposes of orientation, assurance, and empowerment."

Brueggemann continues: "It is land that provides the central assurance to Israel of its historicity, that it will be and always must be concerned with actual rootage in a place that is a repository for commitment and therefore identity."¹

Just as we see today injustices connected to the basic necessities of life like food insecurity, malnutrition, and economic exploitation, we also see the injustices related to place, home and land, through societies and economies that tolerate homelessness, through the forced migration of refugees around the world, and through the sovereign lands of indigenous peoples taken by settlers and colonists.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) p. 5.

As a result, justice in the Kingdom of God needs to include justice around place, home, and land. And this is the justice that the psalmist speaks to in tonight's psalm. And it is my contention that this justice that the psalmist speaks to should not be just seen as justice that will be experienced eschatologically, experienced at the end of history when God sets the world to rights and "wipe every tear from every eye" and "death will be no more" as John puts it in Revelation. Rather, just as followers of Jesus are commanded to care for the hungry, the oppressed and the sick, we are also called to care for the dispossessed and the displaced. We are called to work against the causes of homelessness and to work for suitable housing for all our fellow humans. We are called to work to support the plight of refugees and those forced to migrate, whether due to war, economic devastation, or environmental catastrophe. (As the banner says outside this Cathedral – "Let's fully welcome refugees.) And we are called to work for true reconciliation between settlers and indigenous peoples, reconciliation that takes seriously the theft of sovereign lands and territories.

The psalmist says in tonight's psalm: "Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever." May each of us heed the psalmist's call to "do good" and work for justice, the justice that God desires and loves so much, especially justice related to place, to home, and to land.

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+