

Genesis 38
Joseph and his kerb crawling brother
Christ Church Liverpool
Andrew Evans, 28th February 2010

How did you feel as you left the house for church this morning? Half-asleep perhaps if you had to be here for 9am to set up the PA and the chairs! Happy, perhaps, at the thought of seeing friends you've not seen all week. Stressed out by getting the children to put their shoes on and stop playing with Duplo so you could get them in the car?

I'm sure there are quite a lot of us who, if we're honest, really didn't want to come to church at all this morning. Perhaps we're feeling angry with somebody else in the church and don't really want to see them. Possibly you are feeling sad about something really difficult that has happened in your life this week. If you're here with a friend because this is a guest service maybe you're feeling nervous or worried about being in church at all – this is just not a comfortable or familiar place for you.

But I'm guessing that most of us who felt really fed and miserable about being at church this morning managed to put on our hair products, after-shave or make-up and manage a smile and a cheery "good morning" to the people that we met.

We all know, don't we, that sometimes people are feeling inside much worse than they are looking on the outside. And it seems to have become part of our Jeremy Kyle style confessional culture that preachers tend to say how terrible that is and how we all need to be so much more honest about how we are feeling etc etc..

Well I hope you'll be relieved to know that I'm not going to do that this morning. I'm not going to tell you that you need to ditch that useful phrase "I'm fine" and tell everybody you meet at church on a Sunday morning how much you don't want to be here or how rubbish your week has been.

Now of course I hope that the church family is a place where each person who is a church member or regular feels able to be honest with others about their struggles. If you come here and feel there's no-one to whom you can go with a problem that is a terrible thing and I would want to encourage you to really work hard at developing those kind of more intimate friendships with some people in the church. It's one of the main reasons for joining a LifeGroup or Student LifeGroup in the church – it provides you with a smaller group of people that you can be a bit more free and open with than you might feel like being in a big gathering on a Sunday morning. So if you've not done that yet I'd really encourage you to join one of those small groups.

PAUSE

This morning's passage is all about people who are not what they seem. People who look like one thing but are, in fact, something else. But, and I hope you'll be glad to hear this, the application of this passage to us is not that we should all beat ourselves up about not wearing our hearts on our sleeves. Instead this passage is all about the fact

that God provides wonderful, astonishing rescue, hope and transformation for people like me, and you, who are quite often not what we seem to be.

This morning we're going to see three things in this story – the appearance, the reality and the implications. The appearance, the reality and the implications.

Appearance:

Judah looks like an unbeliever

If you're familiar with the story of Joseph through Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, which is certainly how I first got to know this story, chapter 38 will be a bit of a surprise to you because it gets completely missed out!

And at first reading it does seem like a totally unnecessary addition to the story. Because you could easily go straight from the end of chapter 37 to the beginning of chapter 39 and not miss out anything essential in the story of Joseph.

But in fact these chapters are not meant to be the story of Joseph, though he is the single most significant character. They are the story, as chapter 37v2 tells us, of the family of Jacob. The writer of Genesis is not just interested in the technicolour hero; he is interested in the fate of all this family to whom God has made great promises.

And Judah is already playing an important part in that story. If you were here last week you'll remember that it was Judah's idea not to kill Joseph. Not because he was a nice, kind man who wanted to protect his little brother. But because he didn't want the guilt of actually executing him and he saw the opportunity to make a few quid.

That's the kind of guy we're dealing with here. Judah, to put it mildly, is not a nice chap. And right from the beginning of this chapter there are some pretty clear signs of what we ought to expect from him.

First of all, v1, he "left" his brothers and "went down", to stay with his Canaanite mate Hirah. Judah would, literally have been travelling downhill from where he lived to the place he went to. And you might think that any influence or company would have been netter than his brothers! But actually those words – leaving and going down, are almost always negative words in the Bible. They suggest turning aside from a path of goodness and, as we might say, his life went downhill from there.

The next thing Judah does is get himself a wife. Our translation is a bit reserved and English here. Judah, the Hebrew says, saw the girl, took the girl and lay with the girl. It's not exactly the height of romance is it?

And the whole family reflects Judah's character. His oldest son, Er, is evil. In fact his name, Er, is evil spelled backwards in Hebrew! He is so evil that God puts him to death, the first individual in Genesis that we are told God has singled out in this way. And there have been some

pretty evil people in the story so he must have been fairly spectacularly bad I imagine.

His next son, Onan, and I hope you'll pardon the expression but I think it's a fair reflection of what happened, is quite happy to shag Tamar but won't let her become pregnant because he knows that, if she does, the child will take his older brother's double share of the inheritance. He wants the sex but not the child support.

Then Judah, with no intention whatsoever of letting Tamar marry his third son (after all to lose one husband may be considered unfortunate to lose two looks like you're a jinx), promises her that she can marry him eventually and then packs her off back home where he won't even have to provide food for her.

Almost the first thing Judah does after his official period of mourning for his wife is over is find himself a prostitute and he's so desperate for a quick one that he agrees to leave his staff, seal and cord – the ancient equivalent of his passport, driving licence and credit cards – with a one-goat street walker.

Finally, being fully aware of his own sexual failure, as soon as he hears that Tamar might be guilty of a similar offence he wants her burned alive. Despite the fact that he sent her away from his house he still presumes to act as her judge and executioner.

Judah is a nasty piece of work. In fact we've already met someone in this story who is just like Judah. His name was Esau. And at the beginning of chapter 36 he did exactly the same as Judah did at the beginning of chapter 38; he left his family and married a Canaanite woman.

Those were the signs in Esau's life that he was not truly one of God's people, even though he was descended from Abraham. And the appearance is that Judah is just the same – he too is an unbeliever. And then there's the daughter in law.... Tamar.

Tamar looks like a prostitute

Throughout most of the first part of the story Tamar seems very passive. She doesn't really do anything; but terrible injustices and wrongs are perpetrated against her.

Then, suddenly it seems, in v13 she takes action. She gets up and goes out and gets what she wants.

And the big emphasis in this part of the story is all about her clothes. Tamar stops looking like a widow and starts looking like a whore. We're not told exactly what kind of garments that meant in practice. All adult women in that culture would have worn a veil out in public. So there must have been something about the style, colour or arrangement of the prostitute's headgear that distinctively marked out her profession.

Tamar didn't go for just any old prostitute's look though. She dressed up as a fertility call-girl; combining sexual wantonness with idolatrous worship. That's why when Judah's mate Hiram goes looking for her he calls her a "shrine-prostitute"; literally, and ironically, a "holy-woman".

It's a sordid little tale of an unbelieving man from God's family and a wife who dresses like a hooker.

But that is just the appearance! And the reality that lies behind the appearance is very different, in fact shockingly different.

Reality:

Judah is God's chosen king

By the end of his story Esau remains far from his family and leads a new nation opposed to those who follow the Lord.

By the end of his story, in chapter 49, Judah is told that the rulers staff will never depart from between his feet. How does this man go from being someone who gives his staff to a prostitute to being the father of kings who keep their staff's firmly in the right place?

At the beginning of this story Judah loses two sons because of their great evil. By the end of this story he is given with two more sons, twins born to Tamar. Just as with his grandfather Isaac the arrival of twin boys is a sign that Judah is the chosen one, the one from whose line kings will come. A sign that Jacob will make explicit in his blessing of Judah at the end of the book.

Joseph is the poor victim who was sold into slavery. Joseph is the one whose actions will save the lives of millions of Egyptians and his own family. Joseph is the one who, we will see in two weeks time, flees sexual temptation.

Judah is the one who sold Joseph into slavery, married a pagan, refuses his duty as a father-in-law and sleeps with prostitutes when his wife is hardly cold in the grace.

And who gets to be the royal family line? Judah's kids!

How on earth can that be? Well there is, as I'm sure you spotted, a key turning point in the story. When Tamar confronts Judah with his cord, staff and seal he doesn't try and deny his sin, lie his way out of the situation or say that she's as bad as him.

Instead he confesses: "She is more righteous than I." It's actually even stronger than that: She is righteous, not I."

The difference between Esau and Judah isn't bad buy versus good guy. It's bad guy who keeps on going his own way versus bad guy who repents. The reason Judah is God's chosen king is because he repents.

It would be equally true, perhaps more true, to put it the other way round: the reason Judah repents is because he's God's chosen king. There is something about Judah's behaviour here that is miraculous. He doesn't undergo an amazing transformation from someone who seemingly cannot do anything right because he tries really hard. It is clear that God works in his life through Tamar to bring Judah to realise his wickedness and repent, turn around.

But Judah still has to repent. He had to fess up, to say the words, to choose to act rightly from there on in.

What are the implications of that for us? We'll see in a minute. But let's look at the reality of Tamar first...

Tamar is God's righteous one

If you are a guest here today you probably ought to know, before you decide whether you want to come back, that in the brief history of Christ Church Liverpool fancy dress has played quite a significant role in people's leisure time. Anybody who wants to ask Gary Wallis about dressing up as Richard Gere's character in an Officer and Gentleman or Sarah Oliver about the 118118 men should see them afterwards.

But Gary, Sarah and many others here who have dressed up as superheroes, tube stations, or anything else in the last few years should know you are in good company.

Because fancy dress plays a big part in the book of Genesis too!

In fact on two occasions we have seen people act very badly and deceive somebody else using good clothes. Jacob dressed up in goat skins to make himself feel to his blind father's touch like older son, and inheritor of the rights of the firstborn, hairy (really hairy!!) Esau.

And, in a touch of irony, the deceiver became the deceived as Jacob's sons splashed Joseph's robes in goats blood to make it look like Joseph was dead when they had sold him as a slave.

Well now we come to a third fancy dress story: Tamar dresses up as a prostitute to deceive Judah. And, just in case we didn't get the fancy dress connection the author of Genesis draws out attention to the fact that, just like the previous two fancy dress deception stories, this one also involves a goat!

Boo. We think. Terrible deceitful Tamar. But no. Because Tamar isn't wicked. In fact the whole story presents her actions here as entirely right and good. Even Judah recognises that doesn't he – "she is righteous not I."

There's a wonderful irony here. Tamar dresses herself to look wicked (like a prostitute) in order to actually do good; to continue the family line of Jacob and his sons and grandsons which was exactly what God had told them to do.

Tamar could have rejected her Israelite family and sought her father's protection. She could have chosen to expose Judah's failure to provide his younger son as a husband, repudiated her betrothal to Shelah and married a nice Canaanite boy. Or she could have chosen to become an actual shrine-prostitute; it was a well paid job.

But she doesn't do that. Although she has very strong suspicions about Judah (and knows that he is likely to make himself available to her if she looks like a prostitute), she still wants to be part of this family. She wants her children to be in the family line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Tamar is so determined to secure the blessing of God for her children that she is willing to make herself look unrighteous, she is willing to appear to be ungodly.

So what does all that mean for us? Well I said at the beginning that this passage is all about God providing wonderful, astonishing rescue, hope and transformation for people like me, and you, who are quite often not what we seem to be. And in these two character, Judah and Tamar, we see both our part and God's part in that rescue...

Implication:

Salvation comes to people who realise their sin

The difference between Esau, the unbeliever, and Judah, the father of kings, wasn't really anything to do with how good they were. In fact, based solely on the stories in the Bible, and obviously there were a lot of other things that went on in their lives that we don't know about, but based on the Bible record I'd say that Judah just pips Esau to the post as the biggest scumbag. But it's close.

No the difference between them is the moment when Judah realises he is not righteous. It's the moment he sees that he is in the wrong. That he has failed to do what God had said he ought to do.

The difference between the believer, the Christian, and the non-believer is not to do with goodness. It is to do with repentance. Salvation, rescue, God's blessing comes to people who realise their sin.

That has big implications for all of us. Perhaps you are the kind of person, like Judah, who has never really fronted up to your sin. To the fact that your actions, words and thoughts, over the years, have been hurtful to many, have damaged others and, most of all, have offended God.

If that's you this morning then you need to know that unless you admit that reality there is no hope for you. Because the only difference between those rescued by God and those not rescued by him is repentance that means that if you are not sorry, before God, for all the things you have done wrong in your life there is no salvation for you.

The example of Judah is a massive wake up call to all of us, for we are all sinners, to realise our unrighteousness. To stop questioning God. Not in the sense that we must never have any questions – as anybody who comes to CCL regularly we encourage all sorts of questions about the Bible, the Christian faith and everything else in life. But to stop questioning God in the sense of accusing him. Of calling for him to be burned when it is **us** who is at fault in the world.

This morning if you have never repented before God of your sin the example of Judah tells you that now is the time to do that. Today is the day to admit your own unrighteousness and ask for his forgiveness. If you don't believe that you need that kind of forgiveness in your life why not ask your best and most honest friends or your girlfriend of your husband. Two minutes of honest

feedback about how we make them feel sometimes ought to be enough to convince any normal human being that we are sinners!

You should know that if you do this, if you repent of your sin, it will change your life in ways that may be very costly for you. Judah, over the coming chapters, will change from being the man who sold his younger brother Joseph into slavery to become a man who is willing to be sold himself to save his brother Benjamin from the same fate.

Salvation comes to people who realise their sin.

Salvation comes through someone who looks like a sinner

If Judah teaches us about our part in that rescue Tamar teaches us about God's part...

Because the thing about Tamar is that she becomes the means of Judah's rescue by looking like she is wicked when she isn't.

She appears to be a sinner, is accused of doing great evil and is sentenced to death, even though all she has done is seek to bring God's blessing to his people by fulfilling God's promises of descendants in Abraham's line.

Judah is rescued by realising the righteousness of someone who, at first sight, looks like a wicked sinner who should be condemned.

And we too need to be rescued by looking to someone who appears to be a sinner. One of the shocking things about Jesus Christ was that when he, the living God in human flesh, came and walked the earth, he wasn't recognised. More than that he was thought to be a wicked man. He was thought to be a sinner. The people he hung out with and the things he said made people think that he was a criminal, though he did nothing but seek to bring God's blessing to his people by fulfilling God's promises.

Jesus Christ was a direct descendent of Tamar. And, like her, he was righteous but looked like a sinner. But unlike Tamar Jesus was not merely sentenced to death. He was killed. He was assigned a place with wicked people and executed in one of the only forms of killing ever devised that could be thought of as worse than being burned to death. Jesus Christ, the righteous one, was crucified, died and was buried.

However Jesus is not dead today. He is resurrected in power from the grave, a subject we'll be thinking about a lot in the next few weeks at our a Passion for Life events over Easter, and today lives to rescue unrighteous people like you and me.

Tamar's descendent, Jesus, suffered a greater injustice than his ancestor. And Tamar's descendent, Jesus, offers a greater rescue than his ancestor. Through Jesus you and I can be rescued from all our wickedness and sin and rebellion against God. By putting our trust in the one who looks like a sinner but isn't a sinner we can be saved.

If you have never repented of your unrighteousness then this morning is the time to come to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation. And if you have done that, if

you are a Christian here this morning, this is a moment to reflect on the wonder that the Son of God, the righteous king of glory, the Lord of heaven, would be willing, for the sake of bringing blessing to you, to make himself look like a sinner.