

Genesis 44-45

Joseph and his amazing resurrection

Christ Church Liverpool

What happens when you put your life in someone else's hands? It's a question that's relevant to quite a lot of people here at the moment.

Perhaps you are one of the group of people who are getting married over the next few months, going to pledge your allegiance for life to another human being. Or maybe you are one of our small army of graduating students and other job hunters, looking for an employer who will have control over what you do with the majority of your waking hours. Alternatively you could be among the group of people who come regularly to Christ Church who are thinking about church membership, deciding whether to commit yourself to accountability for how you live your life to the other 100 and more people who are church members here.

Depending on your background and experiences, such decisions might be quite difficult. Many of us have a bad history with a church and the thought of being in any way formally connected to church and church leaders is worrying. Others have had dreadful bosses and, however much you need the income that working brings, you may be nervous about the prospect of putting your working life in the hands of someone who may turn out to be a tyrant. Still others come from broken homes where parents were, perhaps, sullen and silent with each other or, worse, violent tempers flared. So as delighted as you are to be in love the thought of a marriage covenant, a formal binding to another person for life is a source of anxiety.

Just this week there was a striking illustration of the dangers of putting yourself in the hands of others as the Pope apologised and begged forgiveness from the victims of sexual abuse by priests around the world. Imagine if you were one of those people. I don't know all of you but it's likely that in a gathering this size several of you have had the experience of sexual or physical abuse from someone you trusted. And, as a result, you will be rightly wary of entrusting yourself into the hands of others.

Since our experience of other people is that they are all imperfect in one way or another I guess all of us find it hard to trust people to a greater or lesser extent. So we ought all to be able to relate to the experience that Joseph's brothers have as they are forced to put their lives in the hands of a powerful Egyptian ruler who seems to set them up in a way that could totally devastate their lives.

This family is starving in a famine. And the one man, the Prime Minister of Egypt, who has the resources at his disposal to feed their extended family of 70 people, seems to take an unhealthy interest in their family, plant money and possessions on them and threaten to imprison the youngest brother, Benjamin.

The brothers have come for food. Joseph gives it to them, accompanied, at the end of the previous chapter, by a

great banquet. As they head on their way, still not knowing that in fact the Egyptian Prime Minister is their long lost brother who they sold into slavery 22 years or more ago, Joseph dispatches his servant to retrieve the cup that he has had planted in Benjamin's satchel.

The brothers are totally united in their belief that none of them would have done this; they are willing to stake their futures on each others' innocence in this matter. When the steward starts a search there is no hesitation; they all lower their bags to the ground swiftly expecting him to find nothing.

But obviously they weren't familiar with those famous airport security question: Did you pack these bags yourself? Could anybody have tampered with them since you packed them? Because, lo and behold, what is found but Joseph's precious drinking goblet.

At this point the brothers have a choice. They can take the considerable amount of food and even greater amount of cash that Joseph has given them and leave Benjamin to his fate. But they decide instead that they will all return to Joseph's house.

The situation would be bad enough if it were any of the brothers. But Benjamin is the favourite son of their father Jacob, left behind at home hundreds of miles away, who the others have sworn to protect with their lives. If Benjamin stays in prison not only will his life be over but so, effectively, will theirs.

These men have, from necessity, put their lives in Joseph's hands and, if you look at it from their perspective, it seems he has not repaid them at all well.

We'll return to the story in a minute. But before we do that let's just think about what possible relevance this 3,500 year old tale might have for us, today, not in an ancient agrarian society but in a modern, urban setting like 21st century Liverpool. If there is one person who residents of the UK today find it hard to imagine allowing to control their lives it is God. In all the times I have had really extensive conversations with people from different backgrounds about the Christian message, the ultimate conclusion, the place that most people reach in the end, is not that there is no God. It's not that they do not think the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, the central historical claim of the Christian faith, is inadequate. It's not that they think that there is any compelling reason to believe that the Bible is not an accurate record of both history and theology.

Most people who really know what the Christian message is end up believing in God. They end up thinking the resurrection probably happened. They end up thinking that the Bible is an accurate book. But they just don't believe that they can entrust their life to God.

And many Christians too, while saying that we are followers of Jesus, have sections of our lives that are closed off to his teachings, areas of our behaviour where we will not commit to radical obedience, simply because we do not trust that God can make a better job of telling us how to run our lives than we can.

Well in these two chapters what we will see is that the God of the Bible can be trusted. He is not like the character the brothers would have seen in the Egyptian Prime Minister. God is not out to get us. He is not setting us up for a fall. He has no desire to harm us.

In fact we will see, through two characters in this story, two different facets of the wonderful purposes that God has for people through Jesus.

We are going to see, first, as we look at Judah, that what Jesus offers us is a leader who gives his life. And second, as we look at Joseph, that what Jesus achieve for us is to be a Lord who brings us everything.

1 What Jesus offers us – a leader who gives his life.

We, the readers of Genesis, are in the privileged position of knowing who Joseph really is. We know that he is not seeking to harm the brothers but testing them to see if they have really changed from the characters who sold him into slavery for not much more than the fact that they didn't like the fact that Dad has given him a new coat.

In fact the cup that figures in this story is all about that. Do you notice how when he's speaking to his steward Joseph just describes it as his "silver cup". It's just a nice goblet that he drinks his wine out of!

But when he and the Steward speak to the brothers about the cup it becomes the cup that Joseph uses for divination.

Egyptians regularly practiced mixing together oil and water, or oil and wine and reading the patterns that formed (a bit like reading tea leaves) as a guide to the future. Joseph, of course, with his strong conviction that the revelation of the future lay with God alone, would not have done this.

But this cup IS a cup of divination. Because using this cup Joseph is going to determine whether or not the brothers have really changed. Their response to the discovery of this cup will reveal what they are really like as people. This truly is a cup of divination!

And what the cup reveals is truly wonderful. When it is found the brothers go together, as one man, to Joseph. They know, v16, that they are innocent of this crime of theft. And yet they also realise that what God is doing here is uncovering their guilt for their previous crime of selling Joseph into slavery. And they are willing to stand together in taking the punishment.

Joseph won't have that. Joseph, v17, says that it is not in him to punish the innocent; a rather pointed contrast with the way they behaved selling innocent Joseph as a slave. Joseph's intention is only to keep Benjamin. The rest can go.

He gives them every opportunity to get out of there and leave their younger brother, who, remember, was only a half-brother and whose favoured status had been a thorn in their flesh, in the slammer.

But then Judah steps in. In the longest speech in Genesis he pleads with Joseph not to keep Benjamin but, instead, to take him as a slave and let Benjamin go. He poignantly retells the story of what happened when they returned from Egypt last time. He tells Joseph about Jacob's huge affection for Benjamin, without any sense of bitterness. He recounts that Benjamin is the only one of Rachel's sons left now that Joseph is no more and how Joseph will suffer fatally if Benjamin doesn't come back.

Judah tells Joseph about his vow to keep Benjamin safe, a vow that he now shows he is truly determined to keep. It wasn't just a ruse to get Jacob to let them go, it was sincerely meant. For the first time in the Bible someone willingly offers their own life as a substitute for another life. The whole speech is so moving, so powerful, that Joseph can no longer control his emotion and sends the servants out of the room as he reveals his true identity to his brothers.

What Judah does in this speech is demonstrate that, through the various events of his life, he has been transformed and moulded to be a suitable man to lead the fledgling nation. He shows that his descendants are the right people to be the moral guardians of the people of Israel. Judah proves himself to be a worthy leader.

This man is a leader worthy of God's people because he offers himself, his own life, in place of his brother, his friend. Great love, Jesus said, has no man than this; that he lay down his life for his friends.

It's almost the definition of heroism isn't it? It's being willing to put your life on the line. But Jesus wasn't just willing to put his life on the line for an innocent brother. Jesus, Judah's descendent, did more than his ancestor.

He actually died. He carried through the promise in blood soaked, pain wracked, God-forsaken agony on a Roman cross. And he laid down his life not for an innocent man but for guilty men and women and children.

How do I know that God isn't messing me about? When God in his word insists that I shouldn't sleep with anyone I am not married to, that I must not lie or cheat to get ahead in life, that I must consider anything I can get in this world as a trivial trinket and invest my energy and time and money in telling people about Jesus how can I be sure he is not going to let me down, rip me off or abuse me? How can I know that Jesus is someone I can trust with my life? Because he is a leader who gave his life.

There are some leaders who can inspire people to follow them anywhere because they have an amazing and charismatic personality. There are some leaders who can generate followers because they manipulate people's fears. And there are some who get people along by making promises backed by nothing more than words. Jesus is not like any of them. You can trust Jesus with your life because he is not only willing, but actually has, laid down his life for you, although you did not deserve it.

Perhaps you're here this morning and you have a hesitation about following Jesus. You have seen the evidence for his life and death. You are sure that this world is not an astonishing accident but a carefully crafted creation of God. You are convinced that the Bible is not a story book but the book of God, retelling history accurately and revealing God's purposes in it. But your hesitation is whether you can trust him.

It's the main reason people don't follow God. The vast majority of people believe in the God. The God the vast majority of people in the UK believe in is, approximately, the God of the Bible. But they don't trust him.

If that's you then this morning you need to repent of that lack of trust. Because what Jesus offers us is a far, far greater version of what Judah offered. His life for ours. God's king, the man he elects to lead his people, is not a tyrant, a manipulator or someone who will rob you of joy and life. He is someone who gave his life for yours. If you can't trust him then you won't trust anyone.

What we learn from the model of Judah is that Jesus offers us a leader who gives his life. But for the second thing we can learn in this passage about God's saviour we need to switch focus from Judah to Joseph. And as we study him we see what Jesus achieves for us – a Lord who brings us everything.

2 What Jesus achieves for us – a Lord who brings us everything.

If you visit the British museum in London you will find room upon room of Egyptian artefacts. And one of the most striking things is that as you look at the carvings and pictures of people, made across many hundreds of years, is how impassive their facial expressions are. The Egyptians were masters of the stiff upper lip millennia before the British thought of the idea. Expressing your emotions in public was really not the done thing at all, especially if you were in the upper echelons of society, and even more so if, like Joseph, you were the second highest ruler in the kingdom.

So it's not surprising that he sends the servants away for this intensely private family moment when he reveals his true identity. But it doesn't stop people finding out, because Joseph is so overcome with emotion that everybody within a few hundred yards can hear his cries of joy.

Joseph, as one of the most powerful men in the world, has no reason to lie about his identity. There wouldn't be anything for him to gain by pretending to be the son of a poor nomadic shepherd whose family don't even have any food. But he proves his authenticity by introducing himself as Joseph; a fact the brothers have never mentioned since they reappeared back in chapter 42.

The brothers' response to Joseph's resurrection is, quite simply, terror. Put yourself in their shoes. Here is a man who you betrayed over 20 years ago suddenly in front of you in a position of total power. The brothers are already keenly aware of the fact that what they did was terribly wrong as they have been reminded of it again and again over the last few months. Suddenly, right before their

eyes, is the man they sold as a slave. You can see why they'd be terrified!

I wonder if that was also part of the reason for the huge fear that the gospel writers record on the part of the first disciples at Jesus' resurrection. Undoubtedly some of it was due to the sheer shock of seeing someone they thought was dead living and breathing in front of them. But surely a significant part of the reason for the disciples' terror was that they knew they had abandoned Jesus, they had run away and left him to die alone. At least one of them, Peter, had explicitly denied ever knowing Jesus. Would you not have been terrified that this mighty risen king was going to bring swift and terrible judgment on you? It certainly wouldn't have been any less than they deserved.

Well, remarkably, neither Joseph, nor the much greater one of whom Joseph's 'resurrection' is just a shadow, seek revenge. Instead they pronounce peace. 45:5, "do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here."

Joseph doesn't overlook their sin. He makes them face up to the reality that what they did was terribly wicked. But he points them to the good and sovereign purposes of God that stand behind their wickedness. I won't say much more about that now because we'll look in a lot more detail at the way Joseph understands God's sovereign power for good interacting with the brothers' wicked act in chapter 50 in a few weeks time.

For today though I want us to focus on what Joseph is able to achieve for his family, the results or fruit of his work.

Joseph brings life to the family. He is going to preserve them during the terrible judgment of famine that is to come. More than that he is going to share with them, v13, the honour that he has as Pharaoh's right hand man.

Because of Joseph the family win the approval and favour of the king himself. Pharaoh won't just tolerate this Jewish family from the back of beyond, he will, v18, give them the very best of Egypt, the fat of the land. There is going to be so much blessing and wealth for them that, v20, they don't even need to really bother about bringing their possessions with them because they can have new things when they arrive. It's like being offered a job in the USA which is so well paid the guy tells you just to shut the front door on your house and hand the key to the car to someone else without bothering with estate agents of a yard sale because the salary will be so fabulous when you arrive that it's not worth the hassle of selling your stuff.

As a small down payment on the wealth they are going to receive when they arrive, and remember this is in a time of terrible recession, Joseph sends ahead 20 donkeys worth of stuff; and a donkey can carry quite a lot!

The crowning glory, however, the thing that best demonstrates the wonderful blessings of the restored relationship between Joseph and his brothers, is the clothing. Remember how the story started? The brothers sold Joseph as a slave because they were jealous of the clothes their father gave him. The fine clothes that represented his status were a source of massive

resentment to them because, in their sin and folly, they could not stand the idea that they would be ruled over. So they took away his clothes and took 20 pieces of silver for his life. Joseph gives them new clothes. He gives them the status and honour that they wanted to deny to him. And he gives one of them 300 pieces of silver, not to sell him but to bless him. Then he sends them on their way with the wonderful piece of brotherly humour, no doubt said with a wry smile, "don't quarrel on the way."

The world is full of acts of pointless heroism. That, of course, is one of the problems with the Afghan war that British soldiers are now embroiled in. Nobody, I think, is in any doubt about the bravery and self-sacrifice of the servicemen and women involved. The big question in the minds of British and American voters, who are ultimately responsible for sending them to those terrible risks, is whether the sacrifice is actually worth anything. Is what they are doing really making the world a better, safer place, either for us or for the Afghan people? Well I guess we will all have different views on that this morning.

But the heroism of Jesus Christ is not pointless. He is, as we saw with Judah, a leader who gives himself for others. But he is also, like Joseph, a leader who secures blessing for his brothers. When Jesus took our place on the cross. When he died the death that we deserved it was not merely a gesture of love. It was not a pointless but affectionate token of his concern for us. Because it secured God's blessing. Because of Jesus the brothers, anybody who puts their hope and trust in Christ, any Christian, is welcome in the king's court. God himself extends the fat of the land, the very best of everything, to all of those Jesus names as his brothers.

Not only that but Jesus gives all who trust in him new clothing. Not a nicely cut suit or a glamorous little black dress but clothes of righteousness. He covers our failure, our moral uncleanness, our sin, so that we are fit for God's heavenly throne room.

And, like Joseph, he invites us to go and fetch, all those who are precious to us, to ask them to believe, that Jesus is the king on order that they too may escape famine and judgment and, instead, receive blessing and wealth.

Here at Christ Church we sometimes criticise the 'prosperity gospel'. If you're not familiar with that term the prosperity gospel is a set of teaching that says that God will give you great material wealth if you have enough faith. It can vary from a very crass form; if you give £10 God will arrange for you to receive £100 in return to a much more subtle version; become a Christian and God will heal you from all the scars of your life. Quite rightly we say that this is a distortion of the message of Jesus, that it ignores all the Bible's teaching about the hardship and suffering of being a follower of Jesus.

But the real problem with the prosperity gospel though is that it doesn't offer you enough. Because massive riches and perfect health aren't just for Christians with lots of faith. They are for every Christian. There is nobody who believes in Jesus Christ as their saviour and king who is not going to be wealthy beyond belief. There is nobody who has even faith the size of a mustard seed who is not

to the heavenly court, clothed in the finest robes in the world and be part of a city where even the paving stones are more precious than the displays in the window of Boodle and Dunthornes. The problem with the prosperity gospel is that it can make you think Jesus is a bit stingy, giving generously only to the pastor or some other person of great faith. But he's not. Jesus is a Lord who brings everything to all of his people, every single brother and sister.

Perhaps you are hesitant this morning about being a Christian because you are not sure if it is worth the cost. Well let me tell you that it is very clear in the Bible that there is a cost to becoming a Christian, that it does make life more difficult in many ways and that, like Joseph and Jesus, the true followers of God will be persecuted. But do not for a moment imagine that following Christ is not worth the cost. The God if the Bible proves his goodness, he demonstrates the grace and generosity of his character by giving his people everything. After a short time in this place, the land of famine where you and I live today, he will bring us to a place of more blessing than we can even imagine. A place we will be forever.

If you are a Christian this morning but struggling to stick with the teachings of Christ in some area of your life please let me encourage you that Jesus is the Lord who brings you everything. None of the things that he asks of you are designed to restrict you. There is no hidden agenda to deprive Christians of fun or joy. Quite the opposite. Jesus, the resurrected Lord, calls us to live in the way that will bring us security, peace and joy, both now and forever.

You can trust Jesus, the leader who gives his life, when you decide to submit yourself to him in your finances, your sexuality, your evangelism, your giving, your acts of kindness, your friendships, your family relationships and in church life. Jesus is the Lord who gives us everything. You can put your life in his hands.

And because you can trust your life to Jesus that means you and I have liberty this morning to entrust ourselves to other people too. You can make those wedding vows, knowing that even when the sinner you have married messes up that Jesus, the ultimate bridegroom who pledges himself to us for eternity will not. You can submit even to a bad and unreasonable employer because for all eternity Christ will give you both meaningful work and perfect rest. And you can wholeheartedly join a church family with all its flaws and imperfections because the Lord to whom you are eternally accountable will never misunderstand you. And he will not fail to get you to the Church of the firstborn in heaven where we will all enjoy his, and each others, company forever.

This morning Judah teaches us that we can entrust our lives to Jesus, the leader who gives his life for us. And Joseph reminds us that we can give ourselves to Christ, the Lord who provides us with everything.

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