

Sermon for 13th September 2026, Year A, Pentecost 16

Preached at St Serf's

Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon

Today's readings give us so much good material for reflection that I could easily preach for a couple of hours and not come to the end of the possibilities. In the gospel reading, Jesus and Peter discuss the nature of forgiveness, and how important it is that we forgive other people who have wronged us with the same generosity and love that God our Father forgives us.

Meanwhile, in the letter to the Romans, Paul the Apostle tells us not to judge each other when we come to different conclusions about how to live in a way that honours God. You're not each other's boss, he says. So, if one of you is convinced that being a vegetarian or vegan honours God, then be a vegetarian or vegan, and if another is convinced that eating meat honours God, then eat meat, but don't judge each other over it, because God may ask different things of different people.

Fortunately, perhaps, I don't have that couple of hours in which to do these readings justice, so I am going to instead focus more on our Old Testament reading, in which we are coming towards the end of the story of Joseph – he of the dreams and the famous technicolour dream-coat. I am not however getting off lightly, because this passage alludes to one of the most difficult and painful questions for everyone who believes in a good, loving and forgiving God: Why do bad things happen to good people?

It's a question that comes up all the time in conversations about faith. Anyone who has ever taken or even attended a funeral will have heard someone ask, "Why did this happen to her? She was such a good person. Everyone loved her".

Even among people who don't go to church and don't really believe in a loving God, there is still a sense that good people should have long, happy lives, and bad people should suffer for what they've done. But we all know that this doesn't happen. We have all known and loved good people who have got sick, become disabled, or even died far too young, and our newspapers are full of evil people getting away with murder.

We are not the first to notice this. The ancient people of Israel wrote about it in the Old Testament. The psalms are full of complaints against God because wicked people are healthy and wealthy and going around without a care in the world, while the good are oppressed, sick and hungry. Psalm 73 says: *"I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people... Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning."* And many other psalms follow the same theme.

The entire book of Job – all 42 chapters of it, which we've been reading and pondering at Morning Prayer recently – is a discussion around why Job, a good and righteous man, has suddenly lost his health, family and all his possessions. The various characters in the book, such as Job's friends, all try to offer their theories on why such a thing might have happened. Their first assumption is that Job must have done something to deserve it – that his misfortune is his own fault, but Job argues that he is a righteous man and appeals to God for an answer. And so, the debate continues.

There are many examples in the story of Israel when some calamity befalls the people, and they assume it is because someone has sinned against God, so they conduct an investigation to find the sinner, and when they find them, they put them to death, and then the calamity ends. Remember the story of Jonah where

he gets on a ship to escape God's instruction that he should go to Nineveh, and the ship gets caught up in a storm, which doesn't end until Jonah gets himself thrown overboard and swallowed by the whale, and then the storm stops.

Often, in the bible, people answer the question 'why do bad things happen to good people' by saying, 'well, they must have done something bad'. Or someone else in their household – maybe their spouse or servants or children. This was what they said about Job – one of the very earliest books written down in the Old Testament – and it was still the popular view in Jesus' day. You may remember the story in Luke's gospel where some people tell Jesus about the tower at Siloam that had fallen on eighteen people and killed them, and they ask Jesus, "Who sinned? Them or their parents?" and Jesus had to insist that no, this accident didn't happen because the people involved were somehow worse sinners than those who had survived.

So, what other reason could we come up with? Does God simply not care who lives or dies, who suffers and who has a good long life? Is it all random? What would it say about God if he has the power to help, but simply chooses to watch from heaven and do nothing? Our whole faith is rooted in the idea that God does in fact become intimately involved with humanity, not least as Jesus himself.

Going back to today's Old Testament reading, Joseph has a radically different conclusion about what is going on when bad things happen. Joseph's brothers are anxious because their father has died, and they suspect that it was only Joseph's respect for his father that was preventing him taking revenge for them selling him into slavery in Egypt. And so, they plead for mercy from Joseph. But Joseph turns round and says, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear". In other words, Joseph is saying, 'you intended a bad outcome for me, but God intended to use that to create a good outcome for many others, including you'.

According to Joseph, bad things happened to him because, as a consequence, God was able to bring about good things for others. Joseph tries to point away from his own suffering, towards a vast web of positive consequences in the lives of people who might never even have known him – all those people who were saved from famine *because* he was sold a slave into Egypt. He clearly believes that if God allows a good person to suffer, it must be because he intends other good things to result – though not necessarily for the person suffering, and perhaps not for generations to come.

Even if we believe this, it's a very hard thing to live with. Joseph may be able to look back with hindsight and see that his brothers selling him into slavery did indeed turn out to be a good thing in the end, for them and for their descendants, at least for a while, but most of *us* will never know what impact our lives, however long or short, have had on the future.

Remember the famous 1946 film “It’s a Wonderful Life”? In it, George Bailey is about to end his life because he thinks he’s been a complete failure, but his guardian angel shows him all the positive impacts his life has had on others, which he could never have seen for himself. Honestly, I hope and pray for that guardian angel to turn up at every funeral. Maybe then he could tell us: why did this person have to die? Why Alzheimer’s? Why cancer? Why the car accident? Show me what good has come out of it!

There’s a famous Buddhist story about an old farmer who only had one horse to pull his plough. One day the horse ran off. His neighbours came to commiserate with him. “Such bad luck,” they said sympathetically. “Maybe,” the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. “How wonderful,” the neighbours exclaimed to the farmer. “Maybe,” he replied. The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbours again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. “Such bad luck,” they said to the farmer. “Maybe,”

he answered. The day after the accident, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbours congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "What good fortune!" they exclaimed. "Maybe," said the farmer.

The point is that this side of heaven, no one can truly know why a good person suffers while wicked people seem to flourish. We *do* know it's *not* a punishment from God. God has never acted like that. Jesus makes that very clear.

Maybe, after a few years or decades, it's possible we might start to see how a terrible or traumatic experience that one good person endured may have changed others in a positive way, but there's absolutely no guarantees. The people of Israel who were saved by Joseph being sold into slavery eventually ended up as slaves themselves in Egypt, and then they escaped and were given the promised land, but then they were conquered and exiled to Babylon where they famously wept, and then they returned and rebuilt the temple, but then they were conquered by the Romans who destroyed the temple, and so they spread and found homes all over the world, but then came Hitler and the holocaust, and then after that terrible evil they were given the land of Israel once again, and the consequences of that are still continuing today.

So, it's possible, even likely, that we'll never see what good might come out of our own suffering until we meet God himself and ask him. And I assure you, I'll be right up there with you at the front of that queue.