

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, August 27, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20
“... a new king arose ...”

Once again, I want to look at our texts for today separately then together. First, the Old Testament text. It's the story of Joseph meeting up with his brothers in Egypt. The back-story to that meeting may be one of the best-known stories in the Old Testament.

As we saw last Sunday, many years previously, Joseph's brothers had worked together to get rid of him. They had sold him as a slave, and some passing traders had taken him off to Egypt. There his fortunes ebbed and flowed. Starting out as a slave, he rose to prominence in the household that he served before he was imprisoned on a false charge of sexual assault.

Then followed a rather improbable, almost unbelievable rise through the ranks of slaves and servants, until he eventually became prime minister to pharaoh, no less. There he was able to put in place agricultural and economic policies that at the point of today's text, were helping Egypt survive a famine. This famine had devastated all the lands around the eastern Mediterranean, including Canaan, where Joseph's father and brothers were still living.

Joseph's father Jacob had sent his sons as a delegation from Canaan, to plead for food aid from prosperous Egypt. Joseph had recognized them, but they had not recognized him. Joseph had started to work his revenge on them by having a bit of malicious fun with them. He had accused them of being spies, and had one of them, Simeon, detained as a hostage. He had then planted stolen property on them, and attempted to have Benjamin, who was closest to him in age, detained on suspicion of theft.

But when his brothers pleaded for Benjamin to be set free lest his arrest be too much for their father to deal with, Joseph *could no longer control himself* Genesis 45:1. He broke down in front of his brothers and told them who he was. The brothers were dismayed and distressed, so dismayed and distressed that they couldn't bring themselves to say a word to him – Genesis 45:3. But Joseph told them not to blame themselves because he believed that *'God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt'* Genesis 45:7-8. And there was reconciliation.

It could have become a major international crisis affecting the whole of the known world, what we know as the Middle East. It could have pitted nation against nation, and brother against brothers. It could have brought devastation and loss to an area that was already dealing with hunger, poverty and deprivation. It could have become something that might have been lifted right out of today's news: anger, lust for revenge, conflict, violence.

But instead, there was reconciliation – Joseph *kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him* Genesis 45:15. And there was peace in the family again. And there was survival, for Jacob and his sons at least, as they moved from Canaan to live in Egypt under Joseph's protection. And thus the scene was set for the next major event in the history of the people of Israel – Passover

and the Exodus. All because there was reconciliation.

Let's turn to the Gospel text now. A Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus to help her daughter. At first, he seems to ignore her, which seems a strange thing for Jesus to do. But she persists, to the point that Jesus' disciples get fed up with her and ask Jesus to tell her to stop bothering them: *'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us'* Matthew 15:23.

Jesus' response seems dismissive. It almost seems heartless: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' Matthew 15:24. But the mother still persists, and chooses not to take offence when Jesus appears to call her, not one of the lost sheep, but a dog. Instead, she immediately grabs hold of that image, and in a brilliant debating technique, points out that dogs are still allowed the scraps that fall down from the table. Jesus acknowledges that she has won a technical victory in their debate, and grants her request: *'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'* And her daughter was healed instantly Matthew 15:28. All because a woman stood up for what she believed in.

So, two vivid, memorable stories. What can we take from them when we look at them together?

The reconciliation that we read about in the Old Testament text came about because one of the parties who were at odds with one another had the courage and determination to take the first step towards reconciliation. The healing of the Canaanite girl that we read about in the Gospel text came about because someone refused to stand by and do nothing, but spoke out fearlessly in defense of what she believed was right.

As I say these words, I can have echoes of the news stories of the last couple of weeks ringing in my ears. And I can't help wondering how different things might be if people chose to step away from anger, lust for revenge, conflict and violence, and take the first step towards reconciliation.

And I can't help wondering how different things might be if more people refused to stand by and do nothing, and instead spoke out fearlessly for peace and reconciliation and what they – what we – know to be right and true. So many phrases from our faith come to mind. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. Love another. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Now I know that there is very little that we can do here that would have any impact on events that we have seen recently in the news. But if we do what we can here, we may just bring the people around us and the situations that we find ourselves in into the context of God's kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy.

I am reminded of a story that I know I have used before. It's the story of a woman who was walking along a beach. There she met a little boy. He had just picked up a starfish that had been left stranded on the sand as the tide went out, and was carefully and gently carrying it back into the water. She asked him why he was doing it, and whether he really thought he could help all the starfish stranded on the beach. He replied, 'Maybe not all of them. But I can help this one.'