

Sunday 4th August 2019
Trinity 7 (C) - Evensong

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 50.4-end

NT: I Corinthians 14.1-19

Ok, so, do you want the Good News, or the bad news? Well, you're getting both, so let's go with the bad news first: I am not The Revd Michelle Montrose. I'm sorry to have to break it to you like this, and although I would hope for Michelle's sake that it would be fairly clear that I am not, in fact, her, in case there was any confusion, I thought it best to clarify things early on before reality dawned with the realisation that her preaching was not up to the usual standard. So, that's the bad news. But now to the Good News, which is this: God loves you. Yes, it's true: God loves you. And it's true despite what may, at first glance, seem like lots of evidence to the contrary (such as your having to endure my preaching when you were looking forward to Michelle's). Indeed, not only is it true that God loves you, it is the case that God's love is truth itself.

But I'm pretty sure that I'm not alone in failing to trust in this truth time and time again. I recently completed a short placement with a hospice chaplaincy and experienced an example of this: I met a person who was a faithful, lifelong Christian; this person related how they had looked after their parents, who had become seriously ill as they aged, caring for each of them as they declined, and taking early retirement to do so; this person had also looked after some close friends who had also become terminally ill, caring for them as he had his own parents; and now this person had become terminally, painfully, ill – and this had compromised this person's understanding of their faith and their relationship with God; this person wanted to know why this was happening to them despite their being a faithful, committed Christian who had lived a life regularly praying, worshipping God and doing good for others. And I imagine that we can all completely understand why this person felt like

this; indeed, I'm sure we can absolutely sympathise and identify with this sense of perceived injustice, and not just because of this person's particular circumstances; I think that we have probably all felt, at some time or other, and possibly in much more trivial circumstances, that we somehow didn't deserve something that had happened to us: 'how could God let this happen?' we may have thought; or, more troublingly and painfully: 'if this can happen, how can God exist?' When the chips are down, or when we feel that the chips are down, it can be difficult, or seemingly impossible, to trust in God.

And there is an example of this in our reading from Genesis. Joseph's brothers, the other sons of Jacob, do not trust that Joseph will treat them well now that their father is dead, despite his having welcomed and supported them since bringing them to live with him in Egypt. The fear that results from this lack of trust prompts them to lie to Joseph, just as their jealousy, their lack of trust in themselves and in their father, led them to lie to Jacob, when, having sold Joseph into slavery, they pretended that he had been killed by a wild animal. But Joseph responds to this with a gesture of trust; even though he has every reason to distrust his brothers, he weeps, and says to them: 'Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God?' It is God who judges, and God who forgives – and it is God that is to be trusted. Joseph's experiences in life have demonstrated this, and he says to his brothers: 'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good'. Joseph trusts God, despite being sold into slavery by his brothers, being falsely accused of attempted rape and thrown into prison, and despite living most of his life, and eventually dying, away from the land promised to his family by God. 'The LORD was with Joseph' (Gen. 39.2) we are repeatedly told, but there must have been many moments when Joseph was tempted to question this; but, as Joseph himself says: 'I fear God' (Gen. 42.18). Joseph understands that trust in God is not about himself and his life, about bad and good things happening to him –

it is about God being fundamentally trustworthy; indeed, it is only God that can be trusted. As this evening's Psalm puts it: 'O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is gracious: and his mercy endureth for ever.' (Ps. 107.1) This is truth. But, given our fallen nature, this truth calls forth from us the need to trust.

Or, to put it another way: it seems easy for us to trust in the graciousness and mercy of God when things are ok, or even going well – indeed, paradoxically, it seems that, in such moments, trust is so easy that it is not even required. Yet when things aren't going well, when we feel that the shit is well and truly hitting the fan, that is when we are called to trust – and that is, most often, when we fail, when our hardness of heart becomes evident, when the besetting sin of our pride is revealed for what it is: a lack of trust in God, our moment in the high priest's courtyard, our moment at Massah and Meribah, or on the shore of the Red Sea, our moment in the garden of Eden. But this is understandable, because we are, after all, only human, or rather, we are fallen humans, not fully human, not as God intended us to be. And I think, deep down, we know this, and so perhaps we don't trust God because we don't trust ourselves. 'Am I in the place of God?' I certainly think that the reason Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher and Naphtali don't trust Joseph and, by extension, don't trust God, is because they don't trust themselves, because they know how dishonest and unfaithful they have been and are. But if we don't trust God because we don't trust ourselves, this suggests that we do not know God, do not understand God's nature. 'God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?' (Num. 23.19)

Yet given our nature, such trust is radical, counter-cultural, seemingly counter to both our learned responses and our instincts. But it turns out that this is ok, because whilst in our

lack of trust we show that we don't truly know God, in God's self-giving, in Jesus Christ, God shows that God knows us, that God knows what we are, but also what we can be, that God trusts us, believes in us, loves us: 'God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.' (Rom. 5.8) – and this is Good News. In the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, God speaks to us – and we are called to listen, called to trust. And this is something that we are called to do together, because as our reading from I Corinthians tells us, we build up the Church, we build up our faith, our trust, and are built up into the Body of Christ, together – and in this, too, God speaks to us. As individuals, we can become locked, imprisoned in our own distrust; if we have the courage to open ourselves up to relationship with God, and with each other, standing in our poverty together, united in our weakness, if we come together and weep, as Joseph and his brothers do, then God's power will show forth in this very weakness. As Psalm 107 puts it: 'So when they cried unto the Lord in their trouble: he delivered them out of their distress. For he brought them out of darkness, and out of the shadow of death: and brake their bonds in sunder.' (Ps. 107.13-14) And it is in accepting this: our total reliance on God, on God's grace, that our trust is to be found, and that our path to freedom lies: 'Why art thou so heavy, O my soul: and why art thou so disquieted within me? O put thy trust in God: for I will yet give him thanks, which is the help of my countenance, and my God.' (Ps. 43.5-6)

Louis Johnson