

Sunday, February 20, 2022

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

We certainly have great scripture texts before us today. And for that we give thanks. We have yet another opportunity in this waning season of Epiphany where we see Jesus made known to the world by what he says. And we have supporting scripture to help us understand the message Jesus brings to all who would follow him.

From our first lesson to our gospel text, we are quick to see that hardship and struggle remain a major theme for God's people. In Genesis we find Jacob and his family in the midst of one such hardship as the effects of a prolonged famine takes their toll. However, as we heard last week, the psalmist affirms that God does not abandon the faithful. Although God's children must endure times of hardship and famine, endure they will. The psalmist writes of the righteous: "They shall not wither in times of disaster, and in days of famine they shall be fully satisfied."

In Egypt, Jacob's sons encounter their brother Joseph whom they had sold into slavery out of jealousy years earlier. And against all odds, Joseph has achieved prosperity in Egypt through God's blessing, and is now in a position to provide aid for his family. Both his position and preparation serve as the deep roots needed to sustain both the Egyptians and the Israelites through the famine. And even more, the grace and forgiveness Joseph shows to his brothers serve as a model for the kind of magnanimous behavior that Jesus lays out in today's continuation of Luke's Sermon on the Plain. It is not enough simply to do good to those who do good to you. God's blessings are to be shared with everyone and without reserve.

If we took this bit of scripture out of context, it would be tempting to read it as a kind of works righteousness, encouraging the faithful to give and to forgive in order to receive "a good measure" from God. However, in Luke's narrative these exhortations follow immediately after the proclamation of the beatitudes that we heard last week and are a part of our gospel today.

The disciples are therefore exhorted to act out of a state of blessing and good fortune, not in order to merit or earn such. And likewise, Joseph receives his position of power and privilege in Egypt with no strings attached. It is out of his sense of blessing – his sense that all that he has comes from God – that Joseph chooses to forgive and provide for his family. And to borrow from Paul's analogy about the resurrection life, perishable seeds are sown so that God might transform them into the imperishable. And so, we can clearly see that the task of the faithful remains to trust, cultivate and persist.

Love our enemies? Forgive? Some people may scoff at that. Others may fret a great deal. How in the world are we supposed to do just that when we've been hurt so badly; when those who are meek are oppressed, when those who are wicked prosper, and when justice is slow to come, when so many have died?

And we find Jesus saying to all who will listen: “Check this out. Bless those who curse you. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Here’s the thing. If you do good to those who do good to you, so what?”

Everybody does that. But get this: When you love – when you forgive and give and expect nothing in return – your reward will be very great. You’ll be called children of the Most High who brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. I give you the power to forgive sins, to give not just your coat but your cloak. To say to those in the oppressing and oppressive service the empire: You don’t know what you are doing. God forgives you.”

I hope you see that the story of Joseph and his brothers anticipates the kind of power in the forgiveness that Jesus promises. After nearly being left for dead, then sold into slavery years before, note that Prince Joseph leans in so that his brothers can recognize him. Get this, he says. God sent me before you to preserve life. God sent me to preserve a remnant. So it was not you who sent me here, but God, Lord of Egypt and of Pharaoh’s household.

Joseph promises to provide for his father Jacob’s household forever. And he forgives, saying to his brothers: Do not be dismayed. God sent me.

In a little while, God shall come. The meek shall inherit the earth. In a little while – God has promised. Do not fret because of the wicked. We courageously trust God who shows up, pouring out promises like a grain harvest given into the laps of the hungry; giving land to the meek and inheritance to those who are oppressed; and restoring life to the dead.

God has anointed each of his followers to proclaim the good news of the Most High, who shows kindness to the wicked and the ungrateful, who from the cross forgives even the soldiers of the empire. And even more, God gives us Spirit-power to forgive sin and participate in overturning the power of sin, death, and the devil in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, Spirit-power that magnifies the Lord who sent Joseph to Pharaoh, to bring us wisdom that says, “Do not fret.” The God who brings down the powerful from their thrones and raises the lowly literally gives us and all who listen the keys to the kingdom.

As Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain continues today, I trust that we will appreciate the words of Christ before us today. Again, Jesus is made known to us in these words that sound so good and pleasing and wishful.

We may, however, find them good in theory but not words that people generally live by today. We may believe that these words do not have the punch they once did because so many people seem to think and act otherwise. And how sad is that?

My wife and I just finished watching a PBS series entitled Seaside Hotel. The setting is Denmark in the late 1920s’ and moves to the mid-30s’ when the Germans are taking over Europe and making the summer regulars at the hotel take their heads out of the sand and either decide to stand with the German political views of the world or stand against all they see happening. No more waffling. It’s time to take a stand and be counted.

While I'm not comparing today with that era, I am suggesting that followers of Christ today cannot go around with heads in the sand believing that Jesus' teachings are great, but we really can't do much to promote them given the mess our world is in. How sad would that be?

The Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do to you – applies today as much as ever. While many don't know it and may never have heard it does not mean that it has no authority today.

I think that more than ever, as I've said repeatedly, that all of us who profess Jesus as Lord and who believe that God gives us the words to say in any given situation, we need to appreciate that now is the time to begin to speak out and live out this incredible teaching of Jesus.

As Joseph came to believe that God was behind the scenes in his life leading to a reconciliation with his brothers and the ability to be of aid during a famine, today followers of Christ can see Christ in all that has transpired bringing words of peace, understanding, love, grace, mercy and love to our world today.

And fortunately, and thankfully God has anointed us, all who are followers of Christ, to be the ones to proclaim God's word to the world as it is today. The good news that comes from Christ is good news for all time, including right now when the threat of a war is real, when our world is still trying to deal with a pandemic that may be waning, but which has left so many people in search of an anchor.

God is at work bringing consolation to all who will hear his words of love and who choose to live them out in our lives each day. Easy? Surely not. Jesus' words have always been met with skepticism. They have forever landed on those who reject any authority and teaching that threatens their world view.

But they have also landed upon followers who understand that God is present with words that actually do pertain to our situation today and whatever each tomorrow brings.

Today, we who hear Jesus through Luke's gospel can be thankful for Jesus and his providential love for us and for people of all time and place.

Thanks be to God. Amen