

**Sermon Preached at St Thomas' Church Port Macquarie  
Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany, 20 February 2022**

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*Reconciliation.* Josefina da Vasconcellos. Berlin.

I read last week (McCrindle<sup>1</sup>, one of our top line social research agencies) that there are eight major social trends shaping our life in Australia at the moment.

These trends describe how we're coping with life after 2 years of pandemic conditions.

One such trend is Revenge Spending: where we want to spend the money we saved during lockdowns to make up for lost time. I'm pretty sure this what my wife did in the New Year sales but I'm not sure if it was revenge spending.

But one that I want to mention is called HOGO. After two years of not going out much, there's now this thing called HOGO: hassle of going out. Three in five Australians are less confident in organising and participating in social activities after two years of isolation. Let's just stay home.

An interesting social trend.

After two years of not much social interaction, how confident and comfortable are we in encountering and mixing with others? I wonder if that has been your experience? Something to think about.

Today in the Old Testament reading we hear about a very awkward interpersonal encounter. Act three or four of the encounter between Joseph and his brothers.

It's got all the ingredients of an action movie: fear, jealousy, greed, a murder plot, revenge

Today's OT lectionary portion (Gen 45:3-15) is of course part of a much longer narrative (the Joseph narrative Ch 37-50):

Earlier in Genesis we read that Joseph's brothers are jealous of him, envious, and fearful of what they might lose because of their father's perceived preference for Joseph. They focused on what they feared.

These were deep-seated personal fears. They feared their father's love for Joseph, they feared rejection, maybe failure. They were jealous.

So his brothers plotted to kill him, but he narrowly escapes death but is sold into slavery in Egypt.

The story unfolds further this week, when they are confronted by their brother Joseph whom they had assumed was either dead or in slavery somewhere.

He's now in a position of great power over them, and to make it worse, they've been falsely accused of theft:

*Gen. 44:14 Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house while he was still there; and they fell to the ground before him. <sup>15</sup> Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done?" ... the conversation continues and then in 45:1 ... Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. <sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.*



What a special privilege it is to hear of this encounter – this intimate encounter, such a precious one between estranged brothers.

It could go either way – many years ago the brothers had great power over young Joseph and they abused that power. It almost led to his death. Now, many years later, he has great power over them. Their lives are in his hands.

A precious moment of encounter.

When I was young the whole family would gather at our house for Christmas Day. All branches of the family would assemble but the senior member of the family at that time, my Aunty, would always arrive last. No festivities could commence until she arrived. She always arrived late and by taxi. If she was in a good mood then we could all enjoy the day, if she was in a bad mood, we'd all pay for it and remember it for another 12 months.

No one knew which way it would go until the taxi pulled up outside, she walked up the stairs and entered the hallway. The atmosphere would be so thick you could cut it with a knife; if she was in a good mood there'd be an audible sigh and everyone would relax. If bad – people would start remembering they had to be at their other in-law's place that day and start leaving by the back door.

In interpersonal encounters, a lot hinges on the moment.

On Christmas Day, our fate was in my Aunty's hands.

For Judah and his brothers, their fate is in Joseph's hands

*4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.*

What a privilege to hear this intimate moment between the brothers, after all that had gone on before: I am your brother, Joseph.

Martin Luther pointed out that Joseph could have used his official Egyptian name that Pharaoh had given him (41:45) but by not using it, he sets aside the power he has and stands before them as one of them. To their utter amazement, he wants reconciliation.

Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann<sup>2</sup> writes that in Joseph's speech, the power of the past is broken – there is no revenge or guilt, but reconciliation.

A precious moment of God's holy space – the Spirit works to bring about a true encounter of reconciliation.

The other person is a gift – our relation to the other is a precious gift to be honoured and respected.

God is at work here, not pride or greed.

May there be room for the Holy Spirit in all our interpersonal encounters and relationships.

This story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis is one of my favourites. There are lots of reasons for this but at least partly it's because I can relate to Joseph.

I was the youngest too, by far: when I was born, my brothers were both teenagers, and while they didn't officially plot or scheme to do away with me, when you're a "cool" teenager, having a little crying baby in the house is pretty "uncool". They used to take me out in surf, much further out than you'd usually take a small child who couldn't swim!

Of course this story of Jacob and Joseph is more than a story.

It's a saga, or an overarching trajectory that shapes the form and message of Genesis and other parts of the Old Testament.

It's a narrative of human failings and weakness that lead to fear, suspicion and division.

In turn, this leads to exile and slavery, not just of Joseph but for future generations.

Eventually there is liberation, freedom and new life with the escape of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt much later.

This overarching narrative is part of the Jewish identity and self-understanding:

human weakness – division – fear – slavery – (with God's intervention) - reconciliation – freedom – redemption.

Of course this scripture is not just for us to hear about and remember (the formative years of our [Judeo-Christian] faith tradition), but for us to learn something about ourselves: as with any scripture, what was true for Joseph, Jacob and the others back then, is true also for us today.

What can we learn about ourselves from hearing this narrative?

How does human weakness express itself in our lives?

How do we understand and handle difference in our lives? Do we give way to suspicion and fear?

Do our insecurities lead us to be fearful and strike out? Or are we prepared to trust one another and learn?

There have been plenty of opportunities for fear and suspicion over the past two years during the pandemic. How have you, how have I, handled our fears?

Can we affirm others and their contribution, without living in suspicion of them because of our own insecurities?

The message of Genesis is that God is a God of life, is a God for life and is the giver of life. How do we work with God in life giving ways in all our relationships?

We'll be judged not just by how well we treat those who we get on well with, but by how well we treat those with whom we disagree. How well we treat those who differ from us. Verse 32 of today's Gospel: *if you only love those who love you, what credit is that?*

In his letter to the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor 15:35-50) Paul seems to be addressing difference and diversity in the Christian community.

According to Paul, there is a rich diversity and difference in God's creation, but each shows its glory in its own way:

*<sup>40</sup> There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. <sup>41</sup> There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.*

How do you and I bring glory to God by our particular contribution to this world?

My gifts, my contribution will be different to yours, we'll have a different perspective and a different view of some things, but we don't need to fear these differences because each of us can nevertheless bring glory to God in our own way. This adds to the richness and diversity to the church. We are to use diversity as a positive, so we are all built up and strengthened by this variety.

What have been the opportunities for understanding and reconciliation, as opposed to suspicion and fear?

The dishonour, the weakness, the limitedness of our human condition is overcome by Christ in the Resurrection. Any weakness that we have that results in the kind of jealousy, suspicion and fear of difference that Jacob's sons had of one another is overcome by the image of Christ in us:

*49. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.*

King James Version: *49. ... we have born the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.*

This image of Christ in us allows us, despite our human weakness, to bring glory to God.

This is also the theme of the Gospel reading:

*(aren't we glad that we're Anglicans and we have a Lectionary so that it's not just the minister choosing readings, but we're challenged to systematically move through the scriptures on a rolling program and address certain themes like today's challenge us to do)*

**Luke 6:27** *"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. **32** "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? ... <sup>34</sup> If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? .... <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return... <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

This way of Christ is a way of reconciliation: always relevant because as humans we have many differences and fears, but the image of Christ in us says that our calling as Christians is to be agents of reconciliation. Not to abuse power relationships as the brothers did and as Joseph did initially, but to always honour the "other". And these words of our Lord in St Luke define that task.

Today in the Diocese of Grafton, Vocations Week begins: a chance to ask ourselves, is God calling me, or someone I know, to lay or ordained ministry.

SLM  
 Youth Minister  
 Intern  
 Deacon  
 Priest  
 Religious Sister or Brother

We have a program of discernment to help people explore their call, and programs of training and formation for those who seek these ministries. [Called to Ministry in Grafton](#)

Even if you're not called to one of those, you still are called. Maybe your call is to encourage someone who just needs some extra encouragement to start asking questions about authorised lay ministry or ordained ministry. God calls everyone to serve him as his disciples.

Despite what the media might have us believe, research<sup>3</sup> tells us that actually 61% of Australians believe in God or a higher power, and that 40% of people would attend church if invited by family or friends. Yet only about 22% of people attend church on a regular basis. So there's lots of work to do, but a lot of potential.

So as his disciples we've all got our work cut out!

Ministry is a precious gift. People are a precious gift from God. As we go about our work as disciples, let's honour one another as bearers of God's image.

*Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives: give us discernment to hear your word, courage to relinquish our tasks, and grace to bear your image as your agents of reconciliation wherever you may lead, so the voice of your Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth. Amen.*

#### Notes.

1. McCrindle. Australia Towards 2031: The demographic, consumer and behavioural trends shaping the nature. 2022. [mccrindle.com.au](http://mccrindle.com.au)
2. Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary: Genesis. John Knox Press. 1982.
3. National Church Life Survey Research. Australians and Church. Community and Church Summit Presentation. Ruth Powell, November 2019. [ncls.org.au](http://ncls.org.au)