

Genesis 37. 1-5, 12-36

Psalm 57

Matthew 14. 22-33

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One of the things that was refreshing in listening to Kari Gislason was the lack of moralising about all of the bloodshed, betrayal, loss, conflict and turmoil. The stories were themselves. They were not performed as teaching stories, or tales with morals attached to them. There was a freshness about them; and to my own wondering as I heard them. In contrast as I listened, I recognised, how I too often hear scripture. Now, I don't know how this goes for you, but as I heard these sagas, I recognised my own tendency to either place a moralistic shroud over scripture or a kind of doctrinal interpretation over it. Feeling like my ears are partially blocked sometimes; that there's something in the way of hearing the story for itself, as I was able to hear the Icelandic sagas.

The stories that we have heard over the past weeks of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau and now Joseph and his brothers are not moral tales; they make very little mention of God, and there is no sense that Gd is driving the action. Why are they there? Why do we read them?

You might have heard the story about the minister who gathers a group of children at the front of the church for a children's address and begins by asking: what's furry and cuddly and lives in gums trees and eats gum leaves for food. There was a long and awkward silence from the children until one boy very tentatively put up his hand and said: well, I know the answer is meant to be Jesus; but it does sound like a koala. Jesus is not the answer to every situation in scripture; there is not some moral meaning to every story in scripture; and not every situation in scripture can be press-ganged into some form of doctrinal framework.

But I know too many of us were given a kind of metaphoric glasses with which to read scripture when we were children, making it hard to read with fresh eyes as we get involved in the ambiguity of life – difficult decisions; ethical binds; broken family relationships; grief and loss; conflict and turmoil and our own inner mayhem. How can we read with fresh eyes?

Certainly, we invoke the spirit when we read, individually and collectively, and we trust that the spirit will open our eyes. This so often is our prayer. We invoke the Holy Spirit as we read and ponder; but we must also invoke our own spirit to be open to wonder and new insights. But the

“Christian” glasses are sometimes distorting. The great anthropologist Margaret Mead said “Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.” “Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.”

Too many of us in our religious education were taught what to think, not how to think – often with a deeply moralistic overlay. Or injunctions about what we must believe – or our faith might be considered to be inadequate; not enough of it. The practice of Godly Play developed by the American Episcopalian priest Jerome Berryman, and based on the Montessori method of learning, seeks to foster a posture of religious imagination in children. If we are told what to think, our imaginations become shrivelled and wither.

For the last decade I have been reading and reflecting, along with some others, on the philosophical work of Frenchman Rene Girard, along with the theology of an English priest James Alison, which is based on the work of Girard. Girard had an intuition, an insight, a hunch about the place of scapegoating and victimisation in cultures and so he began to read literature through the centuries, looking out for what he calls the scapegoat mechanism; a social action which comes into play when a community of some kind is under stress. Unconsciously the group identifies a scapegoat, rounds on them and expels or executes them. The person who is different, who is not one of us is identified as the problem and is pushed out. In so doing the group regains its cohesion and peace returns. My enemy’s enemy is my friend, so the saying goes.

As Rene Girard’s career progressed, he also began to read the Hebrew and then the Christian scriptures with an eye out for this scapegoating mechanism; whether it is at play in them. His conclusion, after decades of reflecting, is that our scriptures are a long project, over centuries, of recording and exposing the scapegoating mechanism; he suggests the foundation of all societies and cultures, of all three-way relationships, of all families, of all tribes, and communities is the scapegoat mechanism. Around our communities we draw circles of identity, measures of belonging and when things become unsettled, begin to fall apart, we find a scapegoat to push out.

So as we read the saga of Abraham and his descendants we find victims aplenty. Today it is Joseph, the apple of his father’s eye. And in this story that facility which sets us apart as humans is at play in the family spectacle of victim-making. The hands.

let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits

But Reuben delivered Joseph out of their hands, pleading, lay no hand on him’—that Reuben might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father

But they stripped him of his robe, and they took him and threw him into a pit.

We are still victimising in the same way Joseph is victimised by his brothers – families identifying a family black sheep, the socialising we undergo at school in victim-making, the incidence of workplace bullying, the invitation by successive national governments at victimising asylum seekers to create a faux national cohesion. Rene Girard contends that victimisation is our prime mechanism of maintaining social cohesion – hidden but very real.

There are echoes of the Christ story here, resonant in Psalm 22 –

For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shrivelled;
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They stare and gloat over me;
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Then comes the divine victim in the person of Jesus and very consciously offers himself to us.

We have heard one of those gospel accounts which tests our modern sensibilities; our scientific logic. Because this walking on the water is an event which defies what we might call the laws of nature, we are left with reading this as a supernatural act. We make a mistake if we expect to think of this story as being about Jesus' ability to defy the laws of nature. This is not the point of the story. If we only make sense of our world by reading it scientifically then this is all we are able to do with this account. Read it as supernatural event. But this account is not written for our scientifically inclined minds. Rather the account is saying something else about Jesus; about who Jesus is in the minds of the gospel writers.

When Jesus greets the terrified disciples as he approaches their boat he says: 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Always the divine greeting: *do not be afraid*. And his greeting is a greeting of reassurance. *It is I*. But more than this, Jesus utters the name of God to the disciples in their terror. As Moses trembles at the burning bush and asks: *who shall I say has sent me, what is your name*, God gives the name: *I am*. So as Jesus comes across the water he says to the disciples: *I am*. According to Hebrew scriptures walking on water, control of the turbulent seas, is the prerogative of God.

Isaiah 43

I am the Lord, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.
Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
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Psalms 77

When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
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Really this walking on the water by Jesus is a looking back; a looking back into the Hebrew scriptures for signs of the ways in which God intervenes in the world of people; saving interventions when it seems that God's people are going to be swept away. So, this walking on the water is not trying to convince our modern minds of Jesus' ability to defy the laws of nature, rather that this is God present to the disciples in their moment of crisis.

One of the ways that commentators read this account of the walking on the water and the stilling of the storm is as an allegory of the early church; a group in turmoil, undergoing persecution, tossed to and fro by stormy forces. Peter, the holder of the keys, wavers and sinks, unsure of the call to follow and walk with Jesus. As the members of the community, as faithful Jews, for which Matthew wrote his gospel found themselves under siege, they looked back into their stories of being saved from turbulent experience to reassure themselves of God's presence with them. This crossing of the waters by the disciples is a crossing which echoes Israel's crossing of the waters of the Red Sea and of God's power to save; to redeem from very present danger.

This story is saying to Matthew's hearers that this same God who brought Israel through the waters of the Red Sea has been amongst us in the person of Jesus. This is an epiphany, a revelation, a discovery of the presence of God in flesh and blood in the midst of our turmoil. As the birth of Jesus is announced at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, he will be Emmanuel: God with us.

So, as we read these two stories together, we see the pattern of victim-making in the Joseph story. And then we see the one who is God, allow himself to be made victim in order that we might see that God wants to offer us a different way – a new and living way, as Paul calls it – to be children of the father and free of cruelty toward each other.

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