

Proper 19

Genesis 50.15-21

Romans 14.1-12

Matthew 18.21-35

Reflection

It is very annoying to think that God may have different standards of judgement from ours. All three of today's readings warn that the obvious surface reaction to one particular incident may turn out to be quite wrong, if you put it in the bigger context of what God is doing with the world.

Take the story of Joseph and his brothers, for example. There is no denying that his brothers treated him abominably, and even they do not try to excuse their behaviour. Even they realize that their reaction to an aggravating, spoiled little brother was completely out of proportion, and so they cannot quite believe in Joseph's forgiveness. Although they have been living safely and comfortably in Egypt for some time, under Joseph's influential protection, they still expect it to be withdrawn as soon as their father dies. They know what they have deserved from Joseph. But Joseph has seen the bigger picture. He has seen what God has done through the violent jealousy of the brothers, and he has seen that he was not the only one to benefit — all the Egyptian people who might have starved without Joseph's foresight can, in a strange way, plead for forgiveness for the people who unwittingly brought Joseph to Egypt.

In the parable that Jesus tells of the forgiven slave, again, you can see that the slave's mind was travelling in one direction, and he was forced to rethink. The slave sees the removal of the burden of debt as a chance to get his life straightened out. He will set all his financial affairs in order, and make sure that he never gets himself into that kind of debt again. Surely his master will approve of that? But his master's context was a bigger one. He was not thinking just about one slave and his money worries, but about the whole society of people he rules, whom he wishes to govern by example. He wanted the slave to see forgiveness in action and learn how to do it, so that more than one life could be put straight.

So both Joseph and the forgiven slave find out that what they initially thought was just about God and themselves turns out to have knock-on effects for many, many others. And that is what Paul is trying to say to the Romans. Of course there is an individual element to Christian obedience, but the point of it is not just to get our own life straight, but to demonstrate the power of the life of God in our midst.

Paul is writing this passage very carefully. Notice that he does not say that the 'weak' should wise up and start supplementing their vegetarian diet. Nor does he come down on

one side or the other over days of observance. Each person must follow the path that God has given them, and they may actually be different yet equally obedient. It would be easy to read this passage as an endorsement of individualism and lazy liberalism. It really doesn't matter what you do, so long as you think it's all right. Love is all you need. But that isn't quite what Paul is saying. He is trying to get them to see the bigger context. This is not just about you and God, but about the sweep of God's saving activity in Christ. While you sit there, trying to force your own practices on other Christians, God is saving the world. Your small life will have ripples of consequences in God's great design. Will they be ripples flowing out from the huge impact of God's forgiving love in Christ, or just a very small eddy from a tiny, self-obsessed pebble, which has nothing to do with the tidal wave of God's love? Getting the big picture, that God in Christ wills to be 'Lord of both the dead and the living', does not necessarily make it easier to decide, day to day, how to live in obedience, but it does at least remind you why it matters.

At this time of year, inevitably, we are thinking about what happened in New York on September 11, 2001, and Paul's talk about forgiving a brother who won't eat meat seems irrelevant. But if we put these three passages together, in the bigger context they shout for, perhaps we in the West can see our society as one that is going to require a lot of forgiveness, and that might make us more careful in holding other cultures to account. What kind of reactions on our part might bring life out of death, might make an act of abominable violence a goad to the creation of a different society? How might we witness to our belief in the risen Lord of all?

from "Lectionary Reflections" by Jane Williams

Prayer

Almighty God,
whose only Son has opened for us
a new and living way into your presence:
give us pure hearts and steadfast wills
to worship you in spirit and in truth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen