

# Mercy under scrutiny

Genesis 50:15-21

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

One of things that I admire and moves me most about my mother is the way she responded to people who wanted to make life difficult for her. As a Headteacher she went towards the awkward colleague, working extra hard with them while protecting other staff from the gloom and disruption they wanted to spread; in the classroom she went towards the difficult pupil, attending more to them without diluting the teaching the less disruptive ones needed. She could sympathise with the victim in anyone and work with their potential. Further back, and more profoundly, she went towards some family members who made life difficult and, instead of writing them off, found whatever she could admire in them, worked with it and sought to care for them in ways objectively they surely didn't deserve.

Reflecting on this with a friend, he observed how, like a dam, Mum had held back the potentially overwhelming dysfunction of the previous generation, and like a dam, she allowed just enough water through to benefit, enrich and irrigate with what was good about that past. You can imagine how that image has played out this week, two dams collapsing, water inundating Libyan lowlands, as if their present day government's dysfunction were not enough to deal with.

As protective son, I can find bad feeling towards anyone wanting to make Mum's life difficult arising all too easily in my soul. If I let my imagination dwell on people long gone who might have harmed her, I can feel something dangerous unfurl in me. If I let ungracious resentment take hold, even on her behalf, I spoil her bequest of courage, strength and grace. We can be thankful that we are able to measure her role in the family safely in the lowlands of our grief, knowing she had absorbed the destructiveness of the past, the dam still holds, not allowing it to overcome our lives.

I've also reflected how fortunate we are when grieving families have allowed me to see the complexity of their situation, the loose ends they're left with by someone's death. Perhaps you have experienced a seismic shift when someone significant in your family has died. How will everyone cope without their anchorage, wisdom or authority? Sometimes we don't realise how much someone has been protecting us until they have gone, or how unwittingly they lent us confidence just by being there.

Joseph and his brothers navigate the huge loss of father Jacob. He has just by breathing held them together. His death makes everything seem insecure, including the reconciliation they have publicly gone through. The eleven brothers and half brothers are terrified that Jacob, like a dam, has held back the vengeance of brother/half brother Joseph. I wonder how you react to their way of addressing each other. Are the brothers being manipulative or humble invoking their father's memory to oblige Joseph to kindness? In Joseph's response with a rhetorical question – "Am I in the place of God?" – is he softening or exposing them to God's judgement? Could you trust him in their circumstance? How far are they, who wronged him so badly, trying to scabble to moral high ground by casting themselves as victims?

You might, if you've time, read back the whole story<sup>1</sup> of Joseph's casual arrogance, their betrayal of him, his grasping opportunities, their need, his cruel mind-games with them when they came begging for food in a famine. Joseph so nearly decided on bitterness, but somehow, instead, he

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<sup>1</sup> (Genesis 35 onwards, although you could find out more about Jacob's function going back further in the story.)

broke down sobbing<sup>2</sup> and that sobbing let God's grace flow in and reconciliation happened. A whole people were saved. Genesis 50 was not a happy ending to the Jacob Family Saga but a remarkable beginning for the People of Israel. The Exodus became possible.

Our reactions to these brothers may be influenced by the politics of bereavement we have experienced in our own life. I'm aware there could be triggers here for any of us.

The brothers worry that Joseph's mercy is limited. Peter, talking with Jesus, wants to know if he can limit mercy. He makes what he no doubt thinks is a lavish and pious suggestion of forgiving people as many as seven times. Jesus' comical response overwhelms him: seventy times seven. In other words, if you're counting, you haven't got the message that God's mercy never runs out for you, so how can yours run out for anyone else? The parable that follows is perhaps the most powerful of all of them. He raises our indignation to a high point, then we realise *we* might be the unforgiving servant, struggling to trust God's forgiveness lasts, and so embarrassed that we need it at all that we take out our self-loathing on others. How often have we over asserted ourselves as a reflex reaction to some embarrassment.

With a devastating story, Jesus reveals the power of the familiar phrase at the heart of the prayer he taught his disciples to pray: "forgive us our sins as we forgive..."

If I have to manage some feelings about people way back in our family history, I have much harder feelings to manage towards the two young men who assaulted and robbed my son a few years ago. Those quite violent feelings unfurl too easily. My son has risen above it amazingly, while I, the priest, struggle to suppress the desire to beat the living daylights out of them. He unknowingly puts my lack of mercy under scrutiny. He makes me bring those feelings out into the light of these passages. I realise that, just as I diminish Mum's bequest of courage and grace if I harbour resentment against some dead people, if I can find no room for mercy for those who attacked Joe, I diminish the impact of Jesus' mercy on me.

He makes me notice what the other slaves in the story do. They are hurt and angry, but they didn't go and beat up the unforgiving colleague. They took their pain to their Master. There's no injunction here to ignore what is deeply wrong. Rather, we're encouraged to bring our anger and hurt to God. If I can just find a way of praying about, maybe eventually for those people, I may be able to stay in the realm of grace, rather than the realm of fear that limits mercy. What can I pray?

The lurid image of torture at the end of the parable is unsettling, but I stay with it. "...until he pays the entire debt" it said. Joe was attacked when he was well oiled on a night out. He got chatting with two guys outside a club and said they could share his cab. They contrived a reason to get out somewhere and they assaulted and robbed him. When the world weary police officer came to talk with Joe and us, he alluded to a trend of people singling out drunk people in this way and said it was a "life lesson". Indeed, I interjected, but I pointed out that we have spent some decades persuading the judges and police that if a young woman is sexually assaulted when inebriated, the assault is not her fault. So with this.

That left me with something to ponder. I say this not to justify my family, but to show how a prayer can sometimes form even from a dark place. I thought: what's the big story here? When my son is sober, he is generous. When he's pissed, he's generous. When his assailants are stone cold sober, they *choose* to be violent thieves. Everything they stole - watch, phone, money, car keys - Joe had earned himself. What they wear, they have stolen. What do they see in the mirror in the mornings? How do they cope with such dissonance? Well, by claiming there's virtue

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 43:30

because the victim was drunk, that's how. What, then, do they see when they catch their own reflection in the door on their way in to their place of worship if they have one? There is their torture. Who has the problem? Who needs prayer in this story?

And then I think, Jesus died between two violent thieves. Perhaps it was because he knew they are among the saddest, loneliest, most tortured people in the world. Still, I am at risk of feeling pleased that I can humiliate them theologically. But no, stay with the cross. He died between two violent thieves, and one continues the torture by hurling bitter insults, trying to manufacture superiority by blaming Jesus for not rescuing them. The other, however, ends the torture by accepting how wrong he was. He finds paradise at last.<sup>3</sup>

Now I have the bud of a prayer for those sad thugs that, in time, may unfurl within me. I do not need to hurry it. You can't force the pace. But maybe I have a chance of remaining in the realm of mercy. It's not a problem solved. It's on-going. Living as impulsively protective son, and protective father sounds virtuous, but it continues with its attendant risk of building precarious high ground on which to nurse resentment.

Jesus' scrutiny of mercy, and the tortuous consequences of its absence, maybe leaves us breathless. Paul considers the same issue from another angle. He asks why we tend to need to pass judgement on others. Basing our identity, not on what we believe and enjoy about what we believe, but on what others have got wrong is a destructive distortion of our need for mercy. It works on the assumption there is not enough to go round. There is only one way to do things, one way to believe, I can only feel good about myself if I do someone else down. That's a mindset that limits God's mercy.

In the end, Joseph lifted his brothers' eyes to see a bigger picture. Jesus explodes Peter's confining defences and opens up a world of mercy and grace. Paul says, don't nurture false confidence by doing others down. Mum and my son lift my eyes to see how with grace the future outshines the past. All show that past shame and guilt are far less interesting than future possibilities with God. They say: Don't make others into perpetual victims by your un-forgiveness. Don't make yourselves perpetual victims by stoking your own shame. Trust God's mercy. It never runs out. With God, the future is always bigger and more interesting than the past.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 23:39-43

<sup>4</sup> [A future that's bigger than the past: Catalysing Kingdom Communities](#) is a book by Sam Wells tracing how churches might be renewed today. The Chalmers Lectures, printed by Canterbury Press 2019