

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

19th September 2019

Genesis 38:1-26

Spirit... inspire us O imagination of heaven... take our words and do not leave them simply spoken... but that they might change us... challenge us... turn us... towards you... in a reborn relationship... So be it... Amen

O for the days of dullness and predictability... just so we can calm down a little... and draw breath.. .and work out where we are... but they seem to have fled... Parliament is back... and we have even less idea of what might happen... Whatever your take is on the scenes and words of Wednesday night in the Commons... and the fallout thereafter... there is a renewed feeling, is there not... that what we presumed was true and stable... about our institutions... is no longer the case...

Am I the only one who interprets how we treat each other now in parliament... as a real paradigm shift... where a sense of respect... a sense of humility... a sense of basic human value has been reduced...

The rules have changed... how we describe ourselves... how we speak to each other... been rewritten... and the suspicion is... what is said is neither careless or casual... but a concerted effort to pit people against parliament... to draw ire...

Our presumptions about how we treated each other and managed how we engaged and with the world... were clearly naive...

Obviously this did not happen only on Wednesday evening... nor has it only happened in parliament... but has been happening for quite some time now... across all our common institutions... none of which are as effective as they once were in bringing stability... from government to church... from education to golf clubs... the habits and presumptions we took for granted... seem to have frayed...

And that is recognisable in many areas of our living now... how we engage with each other... but perhaps the most frightening thing that became very clear this week... is the way we now seem to value people less... disrespect others... where there is a narcissistic

lack of knowledge and concern about the impact of what you say... It doesn't matter who you hurt... it is the outcome that has worth...

And all that turns on a single word... that we cannot now say... lest it might seem to weaken our position in any relationship or argument or negotiation... the penitent act of being able to say a word of apology...

This... however... is not new... it is as old as the bible... so let us go to the bible... and retell the story of Tamar and Judah... that it might be a lesson for our parliament... and for ourselves... that we might find some moral direction through the times we live in... where fear is much easier to spread than hope...

A reminder of the context of our story... Judah is one of the twelve brothers of Joseph... It is Judah who said... "What do we gain by killing Joseph... Let us sell him to the Arabs... and not harm him with our own hands"... It is callous and shocking... He shows no regret with the idea of murdering Joseph... but rather compounds it... "We could do better"... he suggests... "Sell him, and his demise will not be our doing!"...

That's the beginning of the story... Towards the end of the story of Joseph... this same character... who callously sold Joseph... is the very one who volunteers to take the place of Benjamin... when the brothers face the regent Joseph whom they are still to recognise as their brother... Now Judah is prepared to face the fate of slavery due to his concern for his youngest brother... He wanted to sell a brother... now he wants to protect a brother...

What's happened?...

For that we need to reread this middle bit of the Joseph story of Judah and Tamar... which is perhaps *the* most significant chapter about the success of the human spirit...

Tamar married the two eldest sons of Judah... but both died... Judah reluctant to marry her onto his youngest... left her promised but widowed... She could not marry and she could not escape...

Once she realises this... she takes things into her own hands... (and this part of the story is also hugely significant for our times and today's misogyny)...

Disguised as a prostitute... Judah sleeps with her... and in promise of payment... he leaves her his ring... his cord and staff...

When it is discovered she is pregnant three months later... Judah concludes she has had a forbidden relationship... the punishment for which is death... But before she is punished... she sends Judah his ring, cord and staff with the message... "The man who is father to my child is the man who whom these belong"...

Then as if his life passes before him... it clicks with Judah... he gets the whole scenario... not just who this is... but why it happened... He's placed Tamar in an impossible position... he is the father of the child and he also forced her to prostitute herself... because he refused to marry her to his youngest son... and left her powerless... but incredibly... this woman has the grace and discretion of a saint... and cleverly does not reveal who the father is... but lets Judah know without bringing shame on him... by sending him the three pledges saying... whosever these are... is the father...

She is a wise and brave woman... and Judah says... "She is more righteous than I"...

Now here is one of the most important moments in our humanity... and one of the most significant lessons still for our society... This is the first time in the Bible someone acknowledges their own wrongdoing... the first time someone feels remorse... and it changes Judah...

This is the moment that turns him from the callous... 'how-can-we-best-gain-from-this-brother-of-ours'... to putting himself in the way of Benjamins prospective incarceration...

Judah... the first penitent... recognises and acknowledges his sin... and it changes his character... and how he lives towards others...

Interestingly... of all the tribes of Israel... it is his name that the nation's people adopted for themselves... Judah... Jews...

The name Judah means... to admit... to acknowledge... It is the biblical term "confession"... His name is He who acknowledged his sin...

In Judaism... there is a saying... “In the place where penitents stand... even the perfectly righteous cannot stand”... and the example is Joseph the second youngest... is a hero... but only second to the king... but Judah... the penitent... is the one who fathered Israel’s kings through Tamar...

Where the penitent Judah stands... even the perfectly righteous Joseph cannot stand...

And here is where this story leaves its profound and cataclysmic insight... However great an individual may be in virtue of his or her natural character... greater still is the one who is capable of penitence...

It is a true insight into our humanity... In the one capable of penitence... there you will see... the man or woman... who values others... whose words respect... whose actions include... the one who recognises the worth of another... Judah... from callous brother to generous protector...

Among the oldest pages of the Bible... you’ll regularly find... the most important words for our society... our parliament... our community... There in these pages are the role models for us all... however great an individual may be in virtue of his or her natural character... greater still is the one who can recognise their mistake... who can apologise... feel remorse... In penitence... we make space... give worth... value the humanity... the place... the significance... of another... and when that fails to happen... we have lost more than a political debate...

My friends... perhaps we all need to relearn the value of each other...