

Sermon for 24th Feb 2019. Gen.45.3-11,15; Ps37; I Cor. 15.35-50; Luke 6.27-38

During the week I came across an insightful essay by Walter Brueggemann - one of my favourite theologians.

In part, the writing was about how we humans can become overly confident in our ability to analyse and deduce what is happening around us and in our personal lives.

Brueggemann suggests that at times we believe we can see our life before us in very clear and precise terms and know generally how things are going to play out.

*Such a capacity for clarity seduces us into being very sure.*¹ Brueggemann writes.

And he warns us that when we have such deep certainty and ultimate control in this way - we have not taken into account the purposes of God in our lives and how they can introduce a hidden dimension that we do not even recognise.

Now when we think about this I'm sure we can bring to mind stories of people, who have ventured down a very different path in life than the one that they themselves and others thought they would.

And perhaps this could be our own story.

It is certainly mine— my call to a religious vocation was never on my radar. But I soon found out that God can easily get under the radar.

And I'm sure some of you who are involved in the wide variety of caring and creative positions may sometimes wonder how you arrived there.

One thing I have learnt since I said yes to the call is that God's purposes in our lives **do for us more than we can do for ourselves**. This is something that Brueggemann calls Providence. And what he means by that is that God sees before you and me, that God knows well ahead of you and me and that God takes the lead in our lives. This is not the same as predestination or as being fated, but it is claim that God is a real power in our lives.

I believe that the overall message of the gospels is that the living word of God is at work in us in ways that we cannot categorise or control. This is, I believe, a poignant point for us personally and especially for the church because when we take into our hearts this living mystery there comes a true sense of humility that washes away arrogance and self-dependence and leaves us with a passion to be always in Christ's presence – not just in lip service, but genuinely seeking and wanting his guidance and accompaniment.

As the words of the hymn *Abide With Me* sing out: I need thy presence every passing hour; what but thy grace can foil the tempters power. Who, like thyself, my guide and stay can be? Through cloud and sunshine, lord, abide with me."

I think if there is any doubt that we need always to abide in Christ and he in us, we need only to look at today's gospel passage.

The verses are part of Luke's sermon on the plain. It is similar to Matthews Sermon on the Mount that we are perhaps more familiar with but in both editions Jesus, who is the embodiment of the word he proclaims, very clearly feeds his audience with the specific ways of the kingdom of God on earth.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Taking a Second, Painful Look" in *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*. WJK Louisville, 2011. P59.

Love your enemy he says. Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

Do not judge - forgive and you will be forgiven –
give and it will be given to you.

Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

How can we do such things under our own steam?

I believe we can't - for no matter how hard we try - our old hurts and our deep pain keep coming up and convincing us that we've been very badly done by.

They can even convince us to keep up the rage and sometimes we can settle in and enjoy holding on to resentment and hatred.

We need Jesus' Holy Spirit to lead us down the path of our complex hurts and out into the light of freedom.

And sometimes the Holy Spirit can come in the form of prayerful reflection – sometimes in the presence of a devoted and trusted friend or relative or perhaps in a powerful word or feeling of divine love that melts away our self-righteousness and resistance.

Whichever way it comes, it is ultimately the divine abiding that does for us more than we can do for ourselves.

The story of Joseph in the Old Testament reading today is an excellent example of God's providential abiding love.

And I'm sure we know the story well – but just to recap, Joseph had been the victim of hatred and resentment of his brothers because he was favoured by their father.

The brothers sold him into slavery and pretended that he had been killed.

He ended up in Egypt where he eventually came to great power and influence in the Egyptian government.

He turned out, after many years, to be the one who would give food to his starving family.

Now I think many of us would agree that Joseph had good reason to cut off his family and leave them with their own dire problems but he doesn't do that because he is a man of faith who lives closely with God and is willing to host the way of God in himself.

He trusts that there is a larger purpose being acted out in and through him which he must honour and to which he must respond. Through Joseph, the circle of violence that his brothers began, ceases to be. It comes to an end.

God, he tells his brothers sent me here –not you- God sent me before you to preserve a remnant for you.

It is such a beautiful story that illustrates the workings of the way of the kingdom of God in today's gospel reading from Luke – how much we need to abide in Him who leads us and who accompanies us in God's purposes for our lives.

Love your enemies - do good to those who hate you – bless those who curse you- pray for those who abuse you – do not judge, forgive - give and it will be given you.

Do unto others as they would do unto you.

These are all ways that challenge us in the world in which we live – yet they are ways that are doable when we abide in him.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord,

Help us to live in you as you live in us.

Help us to accept that you can do more for us than we can do for ourselves. We pray that you will make your home in us and lead us into your ways and into your joy.

In Christ name

Amen

The Lord be with you.