

Pentecost 11. 20 August 2017. Facing fears.

I was warned. August is a month when the wind blows here in Toowoomba. Relentlessly. The last couple of days have been a taste of that. And at night the house, which had been so quiet and peaceful, has been filled with unusual creaks, bumps and other noises.

Being afraid of 'things that go bump in the night' is a classic description of fears about the unknown, the hidden, the scary things waiting to catch us when we are unaware. Things that go bump in the night can paralyse us with fear.

Things that go bump in relationships can paralyse us with fear too.

Facing the fears of the places and people we would rather not encounter again. Ever. That can turn our guts to knots even just thinking about it. The bad experiences might be things completely outside of our control, things that happened in communities and places and between us and others. And sometimes those things that go bump in relationships are things in which we were deeply involved which we would rather forget.

Our first reading was part of the wonderful tale of Joseph. Here he is reunited unexpectedly with his brothers. Well, it wasn't completely unexpected for Joseph. Or for God. But what a surprise for the brothers!!

Remember what had happened. We read an earlier part of the story last week. Joseph was a painful little brother who, so it seemed, had ticks on himself and dreams which offended the good order of the family. He got so far up the nose of his brothers that they did away with him. They didn't kill him, even though most wanted to, but they sold him off into slavery. As far as they were concerned, and in the story that they told their father (a story accompanied by Joseph's bloodied coat used as a prop), Joseph was gone and probably dead.

Our reading today (Genesis 45:1-15) is a time leap forward across many years. Had they thought about him during that time? Had his brothers ever wondered what actually happened to Joseph? Was he still alive? Was he a slave still somewhere being ground down by hard work? Where had he ended up?

Seeing the grief in the face of their father, did they ever get overwhelmed by the guilt of what they had done? Clearly that guilt never got to any of them to the point that they confessed to their father what had actually happened. But in those long nights sitting around campfires looking after livestock ... did they ever raise the painful topic of Joseph their brother?

They remembered him. Imagine yourself into that moment. "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" Dismayed is such a gentle way of saying that they were gobsmacked, terrified, absolutely stunned! What did Joseph do? He calmed his brothers, reassured them, filled in the pieces of what had happened across the years, gave them hope and then he wept. Those were not tears of weakness but sheer joy. He kissed them, wept, showed his own vulnerability and THEN, only then his brothers talked with him.

Many of us have pasts where we have made mistakes. Hurt people. Hurt even those closest to us. Many of us, I suspect, have people who we think it might be too painful to face again after the things that we have done.

Perhaps the shoe is on the other foot. Perhaps we are the ones who have been so hurt by someone, or a group, that we avoid them and wonder just how we may react if we were ever to be face-to-face again. Forgiveness doesn't always sit easily, naturally, in the human heart. Reconciliation is a scary concept. Philip Yancey, a wise modern Christian author wrote that "*Christian faith is... basically about love and being loved and reconciliation. These things are so important, they're foundational and they can transform individuals, families.*" What would you really do if face-to-face again with someone who had hurt you dreadfully? Or someone who you had hurt, wondering what they might say or do to you?

Thinking about reconciliation may be scary, or easy, but thought is not enough. Another quote, perhaps from an unexpected source: "*Reconciliation requires changes of heart and spirit, It requires symbolic as well as practical action.*" Malcolm Fraser discovered that depth after he completed his time as our Prime Minister. For him it took him into places where he confronted injustice to seek reconciliation. Malcolm, especially with the work he did in Africa, would have found completely normal and necessary the insistence on justice and the insistence on being heard which we see in the woman confronting Jesus in today's gospel reading (Matthew 15:21-28).

Standing up for justice. Standing up to those who have hurt us. Standing up and being prepared to face those who we may have hurt. All of these take courage. But they are part of the call on our lives as a consequence of being here.

What we face here (I mean here in church, not just today, not just when we read this story, but week by week as part of why we are here), ... what we face here are the realities of the human condition, what lies in the human heart. The things which shape us. The things which can lift us up into amazingly strong, healthy, engaged living ... and also the things which can disable us spiritually, mentally, emotionally. We all carry various disabilities. Some are more obvious than others. Spiritual disability can be buried inside our hearts, but it can paralyse us. How we deal with these things, and how we recognise our susceptibilities to react in a variety of ways, matters.

Do we choose to be life-giving, for ourselves and others? Or do we choose to deny what gives life?

Martin Luther had an interesting definition of 'sin'. He wrote that sin was "*humans turned in on themselves*". Essential selfishness. When only our perspective matters and the only effect which matters for our words and actions is the effect on ourselves. Then we are trapped in sin and are cutting ourselves off from what is truly life-giving and the one WHO is truly life-giving.

What would you have done if you were Joseph? Would you have bridged the chasm in that fractured relationship by making yourself vulnerable? Would you have found the courage to do that? Maybe you have already? Maybe that is part of your story of living deeply your faith, integrating what we live here with what we live out there.

Facing the potentially paralysing fears is not easy. We live in a confronting world. As our hearts ache for the victims of yet another atrocity committed by deranged people we may retreat into some positions which are less than life-giving. To label the perpetrators of the latest atrocity, and many more before, as 'Islamic terrorists' is not helpful. These people know only a twisted version of Islam and so often it is Muslims who have been the victims of their demented ideals. Of the estimated 3500 victims of jihadist terrorism so far this year over 98% have been Muslims.

Scapegoating and pushing buttons of prejudice, as some of our politicians are quick to do, make a complicated situation more confused and distorted. Labelling also allows us and our government to ignore some real and serious concerns which are present among the mess which is the bundle of rationales given for these attacks. Some of the way in which the 'war on terror' has been undertaken itself has fostered despair and bred hatred. When ordinary people, civilians, families are obliterated and noted simply as 'collateral damage' then grief goes a long way to blot out rational thought among the shattered family members left grieving.

Another response to the acts of terror, which is part of what the terrorists want to happen, is that we become afraid of our own places. Afraid to gather in large venues for sporting and other celebrations. Afraid of travelling to places where attacks might happen. Barcelona? No. Rome? No. Paris? No. Milan? No. London? No. New York? No. Cairo? No. Boston? No. Sydney? No. Bali? No. Where would we end up being able to go??

Fear paralyses. Fear and labelling also paralyses our responses to people who are different from ourselves who live in our communities. It is all about barriers which become blinkers and lead to blindness. Responding with caution or fear or resistance to someone who might look a bit like someone else who did something to someone else somewhere else is clearly silly. Yet that is prejudice in operation.

What is the 'take away' from this reading today, from the story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers? Facing fear with generous love is possible. More than that, it is the godly thing to do. More than that, it is the challenge thrown out to us. Who will you face across the hurdle of fear? Family? Friend? Stranger? An unreconciled relationship? Where are the opportunities to discover grace and a new start or at least to be able to move forward creatively? Like Joseph and his brothers it might be tears that wash away some of the barriers. Or it might be that you leap across them with a smile. Love and being loved and reconciliation. We will talk more about these things.

Amen. **Paul Mitchell**