

THE IN GROUP

*Trinity Sunday,
May 22nd, 2016*

Texts

Genesis 25: 7-10
Genesis 33: 1-11
Genesis 50: 15-21

2 Corinthians 13: 11-13

Introduction

Are you one of those people who flips to the end of a book to find out how it ends?

Or fasts forward your favourite HGTV programme on your DVR?

Because what you're interested in is how the finished home looks – not how awful it was to start with!

That is exactly what we have just done with the Book of Genesis!

With Tom's help, we just fast-forwarded three times to catch the endings of 3 famous Bible stories. Because – like HGTV – the endings are what counts!

Family Feuds

The Genesis account of human creation & development begins with a couple who fail to do what God has asked them.

The husband drops the wife in it & says it was all her fault.

The children inherit their parent's strong sense of loyalty & one son ends up killing the other one.

That's what happens when families don't model care and compassion!

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A cursory reading of the remainder of Genesis would indicate that dysfunctional families remained the norm throughout the patriarchal period.

Abraham, the founder of our faith, had a child with his wife's maid & then abandoned the 2 of them.

Abraham's grandson, Jacob, robbed his brother Esau of his birthright.

Their mum, Rebekah, helped arrange the fraud & their dad, Isaac, turned a blind eye – literally & metaphorically!

Things went from bad to worse in the next generation.

Jacob spoiled Rachael's son Joseph rotten, because he was madly in love her.

His other 10 sons – from his wife Leah & 2 maids – were totally neglected.

Sick of being lorded over by their father's favourite, the 10 brothers sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

So much for family values in the Bible!

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But Scripture doesn't leave Ishmael as an outcast in the desert or Esau as a perpetually defrauded son. Joseph and his brothers do not remain permanently estranged from one another.

In the passages we just read, we discover that relationships were restored & family rifts were ultimately healed.

When he died, Abraham was buried by both of his sons. Isaac & Ishmael stood beside one another at the grave of their father.

After many years apart, Jacob & Esau managed to reconnect. Jacob wanted to pay back his brother for all that he stole from him.

But Esau says, *“I have enough, my brother, keep what you have for yourself.”* (Gen. 33:8)

In other words, Esau had made it on his own. His brother’s actions had hurt him but they had not defeated him. Esau had made a success of his life in spite of Jacob’s greedy ways.

The resolution of the conflict between Joseph & his brothers is a much longer & far more complex narrative.

After spending time in prison for a crime he did not commit, Joseph was made Minister of Food & tasked with preparing the country for a famine that lay ahead.

When the famine arrived, Joseph’s own brothers came to him looking for food aid.

He recognized them immediately but they had no idea who Joseph was.

And so he hatched a convoluted plot to make his brothers face up to how badly they’d treated him.

Joseph’s scheme centres around Benjamin – now his father’s favourite child. A silver cup is hidden in Benjamin’s sack &, when it is discovered, Joseph demands that he become his slave as a punishment for the theft.

“For the sake of our elderly father,” Judah pleads, “take me not him.” (44:33-34)

After some heart-wrenching moments, Joseph reveals his identity to his family.

The stolen cup is exposed as a ruse. And Joseph, his brothers, & his father reunite.

Joseph reassures his siblings that he bears them no ill will.

“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.”

“So have no fear; I myself will provide for you & your little ones.”

It is a touching reunion. But the casual reader is left feeling that Joseph behaved badly. Planting evidence is not something a loving brother - or even a decent stranger would do.

Joseph had been a pain in the neck when he was a boy. And his devious scheme to make Benjamin look like a thief suggests that his character had not improved.

Thanks to his brothers, false accusations & slavery had been a painful part of Joseph's life. So hiding the silver cup in Benjamin's grain sack looks a lot like revenge.

But Genesis tells us that Joseph wept as his plot unfolded (45: 1-3). And people bent on revenge don't usually cry about it.

Joseph's deception was not an elaborate payback. Instead, it was an attempt to teach his brothers what an awful thing they had done.

Joseph created an opportunity for them to experience something of what he had gone through. And they suddenly discovered how wrong it was to deprive a father of his child or tear a person away from his home & family.

Joseph had used role reversal to teach his brothers empathy & compassion.

And it had worked.

This time round, Judah thought about other people's feelings as well as his own.

He considered how dreadful it would be for his kid brother to be an Egyptian slave.

And how devastated Jacob would be.

Judah guessed that losing Rachael's other son would probably kill their father.

"Take me instead of Benjamin," Judah had pleaded.

Family unity was restored only when the siblings understood what it felt like to be an exiled brother or a bereaved father.

The God of Genesis

Genesis is the Biblical account of the development of the human family.

It is part history, part theology and part family therapy.

Whether our faith ancestors were really anything like Abraham & Sarah or their offspring can't be determined. What IS clear is God's role in the formation of human relationships.

The patriarchal narratives tell us that God was at work in human history – fostering empathy & compassion & promoting unity & peace.

The appalling way that Abraham & Sarah treated Hagar & Ishmael is somehow made right. The two brothers reconnected & together buried their dad.

The same is true of Jacob & Esau. How nice it is to know that Esau didn't spend his whole life feeling deprived. He had everything he needed. And that enabled him & his brother to make up.

Although, personally, I wouldn't trust Jacob as far as I could throw him!

The Joseph story goes one step further. It doesn't just bring estranged brothers together & restore a long-separated father & son.

The Genesis account of Joseph's reconnection with his family makes it clear that the reconciliation was based on their repentance & newfound empathy for others.

For the first time in recorded history, former crooks engage in role reversal to learn empathy.

And the victim of their crookery draws a line in the sand & says, "*the anger & hatred & violence ends here.*"

Joseph's rejection of retaliation & revenge marks a crucial point in the history of moral development. Repentance & forgiveness become the new standard for human relationships.

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain & the Commonwealth, explains that Genesis is actually the record of the development of the human family. ⁱ

Exodus recounts the emergence of the nation state.

From the dawn of civilization to the contemporary world, God is constantly engaged in fostering stronger ties among people.

Joseph taught his brothers to consider other family members' feelings.

Moses enacted laws that commanded his people to act justly towards their neighbours.

Jesus said that all people are our neighbours.

Today, those who tune their hearts to God's empathetic wavelength include animals & creation in their duty of care.

Which is exactly what God requested of Adam & Eve!

Care & consideration for others – especially those who are different from us – is God's #1 wish for humanity.

It is the very essence of the Divine self.

A Community of Love

Today is Trinity Sunday – the day in which we honour & celebrate the Divine community of love.

Leonardo Boff, the great Brazilian theologian, reminds us that the Holy Trinity is our model for right living.

The Three-in-Oneness of God is not an anatomical construct to be dissected.

It is a social programme to be followed.

Boff writes that, *“The Trinity ...lays the foundation for a society of brothers & sisters.”*

“In which there is a just sharing of the resources of the earth and in which relationships of domination are replaced by relationships of honor & respect among equals.”

“Honour & respect among equals” is another way of describing the relationship among God, Jesus & the Spirit.

The Holy One is an inclusive community of mutuality & love.

It is the mode of being that our Creator wishes for all humankind.

That is what those stories of family dysfunction are all about in Genesis.
Humans had to learn how to be in loving relationships with their families.
Then they had to expand that loyalty & commitment to their tribe & their nation.
Jesus & his Church have helped enlarge the human heart to embrace all people & all creation.

God, you see, is a “big tent” Deity.
There are no favourites in the Triune family of love.
God doesn’t prefer Jesus to the Spirit – or vice versa.

Nor does our Heavenly Parent have preferences among his children.
All people & all paths to the Holy are precious to God.
Our Creator doesn’t even privilege one part of Creation over another.
All that is, is beloved & chosen.

God loved Ishmael & Esau as much as he loved Isaac & Jacob. Leah was as dear to him as Rachael.

And, when Joseph & his brothers became the poster children for family dysfunction,
God gave them all a lesson in empathy.

Conclusion

Trinity Sunday is not an easy day to celebrate.

The men who first developed the theology of the Triune God tried to make the Holy One as dry & dusty as they were!

But God & Jesus & the Spirit are not a set of fossilized deities.

Nor are they like the leaflets of the shamrock – locked in the same position for perpetuity.

The Godhead is a constantly relating, continually responding, community of love.

He is what equality looks like when it is created by love.

She is the model for all human relationships.

Dynamic, inclusive, egalitarian & filled with love!

We can do that!

Bibliography

Leonardo Boff in Sobrino & Ellacuria, *“Systematic Theology”*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2000