

*So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.* St. John 16:22

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It's one of the great stories in the company of all great human stories. Great because it speaks so honestly about so many of the struggles that shape all of our personal stories: pride and envy; bitterness and resentment; injustice and deception and fear. And, ultimately, it speaks of vindication. But, above all of these things, it speaks of providence and grace; of reconciliation and forgiveness.

It is the story of Joseph. A story that we know so well. Joseph, the son favoured by his father over all of his other sons. Joseph of the multi-coloured coat. Joseph and his resentful brothers; and their bitter plan to put him to death. And Joseph and Potiphar's wife; and that whole sad story of lust and rejection and revenge. And Joseph and the dreams. And Joseph and Pharaoh and the plan to save Egypt from famine. One story after another; each a great drama on its own; but together one of the most highly developed characters in Scripture. We hear only a very small part of that great story in this week's Old Testament Lesson; maybe the one part of the story that many forget. But it's this final story that brings together all of the other stories and turns them into something more than just a great tale; something more than just a passing entertainment. It's the final story, the story that we hear today, that turns all of these other stories into a story of redemption. Into our story.

Let me remind of some of the details. With God's help Joseph is now in charge in Egypt; his authority is second only to Pharaoh himself. Having come to Egypt as a slave, a virtual exile from his family, and having spent much of his time as a prisoner cast into jail for choosing righteousness over sin and loyalty over deception, Joseph has now risen, by God's Grace, to the pinnacle of power. And there in that place he has unfolded the plan to rescue Egypt from famine; while making Pharaoh richer and more powerful than he could have ever dreamt.

But the famine threatens not just Egypt but the nations and peoples surrounding it; so, when, back in Canaan, Jacob hears that there is grain in Egypt, he has no choice but to send his sons to buy some. There is risk, for sure; but there is little choice. Death by starvation is a bitter thing. So ten of Jacob's sons go; all but the youngest; all but Benjamin. He stays with his father; who has transferred the favour that he once showed to Joseph to his younger brother and refuses to let him go.

And when the ten arrive in Egypt to buy the grain, who should they meet but Joseph himself. But they do not know that it is Joseph. He has grown up. He is no longer the favoured boy; and they have no expectation that he would even be alive. But Joseph knows them. And devises a plan to test them. He accuses them of being spies; and tells them that, although they can buy the grain that they need, one of the ten will be held as a hostage until they return with their youngest brother; until they return with Benjamin. So they return home and report all to their father, who refuses to let the boy go. Jacob has no wish to risk another son.

But the famine continues and becomes so great that they must again return to Egypt to buy grain. They have no choice. And this time, after much debate, the youngest son goes too. And when, after they have met with Joseph and they are

preparing to leave with the grain that they have come to buy, Joseph arranges for his personal drinking cup to be hidden in the sack of the youngest brother. And when the apparent theft is later discovered; and when Joseph rules that the youngest must stay as a servant in payment for the crime, the oldest brother pleads with Joseph to let the boy return home to his father, who will surely die if his favourite son does not come back. And when the oldest offers to take the place of the boy, to take his punishment that their father might be spared, Joseph knows that the brothers who once jealously wished to kill him are no longer the jealous, bitter, men that they once were. So he reveals himself to them; and with many tears and much rejoicing, he forgives them. And he tells them not to despair for the men that they used to be, and for the bitterness that once ruled their hearts; and for the suffering that he once endured because of them; because, as he says to them, it was all for good. That his torments were part of that larger plan that God was using to preserve life; to make it possible for Joseph to save his family from a bitter death.

In some ways this week's readings from Holy Scripture seem out of place. It is now only three weeks since we celebrated with great joy the Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ from the dead on Easter Day. We spoke then, as we do whenever we speak of the Resurrection, of the hope that we have in every moment because Jesus has defeated, once and for all time, the power of sin and death. But that seems strangely missing in this week's readings. We hear little about celebration. We hear instead about weeping and lamenting and sorrow. As if, somehow, we have forgotten all that we said so confidently just three weeks ago. But, if we think about it, we might begin to see how this week's readings speak of what it means to live every day in hope. In the hope that comes because Jesus has risen from the dead.

This week's readings remind us that we live in the 'in-between times:' the time between Christ's Resurrection and the day of his Second Coming; that, in spite of the good news of the Resurrection, we continue to live in times of disorder and distress. We are reminded everyday that real life can seem all too distressing. We might try to convince ourselves otherwise, but ultimately, so one can escape forever the worry and fear; the pain and anguish that can mar our days and keep us awake at night. At one time or another, it comes to us all. And it seems that the only certainty in life is that life is uncertain; someone or something can be taken away from us in an instant; our joy can be a fleeting as a bright ray of sunshine on a cloudy Spring morning.

That's what this week's readings remind us of; even if we have no wish to be reminded. But Christ also reminds us that the darkness cannot and will not last forever; that just as the tomb was opened on the morning of the third day, so God has the power to bring Resurrection out of all of our many different kinds of death; and joy out of all of our many different kinds of sorrow. Christ says this not out of some vague, undefined naïve hope that things will always get better. Christ says this because of the reality of his own life. His Resurrection is the only sure sign that we can always trust God to bring healing and hope to our hearts; that nothing stands in the way of His power to give us that joy which can overcome every fear; that deep joy that cannot be taken away. That's what Joseph learnt in Egypt. That sorrow is not our last word, because God has not forgotten us. His plan is still our only hope and joy, even when things look dark, because Jesus is risen from the dead.