**Sermon Epiphany 7C**  20TH February 2022 Mornington and Glenaven

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 Luke 6:27-38

“*Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”*  So begins . Tolstoy’s novel *Anna Karenina*. If he is right the texture of misery in each unhappy family is all its own.

One cause of unhappiness in families is favouritism. Whenever parents are asked if they have a favourite child they will furiously deny it but the reality is that there is often a child who is easier to be with, more gratifying, a child who is a chip off the old block, a child who shares his or her parents hobbies, temperament, world view, politics. Then maybe there is the other child, the one who isn’t, who doesn’t. The child who is hard work, with a temperament you might find difficult, an introvert in a house of extroverts – or vice versa, a child who grow up believing and thinking differently. Sometimes the gender identity or sexuality of a child will make her or him that child.

I say this with some feeling, my brother was the chip of the old block, the sporty one, the outgoing one, in time the blatantly heterosexual one; then there was me.

And it is through the lens of the unfavoured child that I read today’s *First Testament* reading. Part of the so called Joseph Novella, a story within a story, chapters 37- 50 of the *Book of Genesis*.

One of the key themes of the Joseph novella is that Joseph is chosen. From the beginning, it is no secret that Jacob chooses Joseph over his brothers. There is no subtlety, no pretence at loving his sons equally. He adores Joseph, and tells his other sons this frequently. He tells them how one day they will bow down to him and serve him. Then to top it all he splashes out on some marvellous cloak for the golden boy.

In the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* his brothers sing this; being told we are also rans didn’t make us Joseph fans.

I understand how they felt, I can understand their anger, their rage. OK I never plotted to kill my brother or sell him into slavery., but I still carry the bruised ego and resentments of the overlooked child.

Some time has now passed since his outraged and overlooked siblings sold Joseph into slavery. We know the story don’t we, how Joseph went from slave to a trusted and powerful advisor to Pharoah. Governor of the land, Prime minister if you will.

How he advised Pharoah to store grain over seven bountiful years for the seven lean years ahead. During that period of hardship hunger came to Canaan and to his father’s household. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain, though ion the first journey he does not send his youngest son – Benjamin. For fear of what might happen to him on the journey.

These humble and hungry travellers do not recognise their brother in his splendour, he recognizes them though and Joseph artfully finds out what he really already knows, there is a younger brother back home. And he contrives and coerced them into bringing Benjamin down to Egypt. After much drama we get to where we are today. Unable to contain himself any longer Joseph breaks down and declares who he truly is to his brothers. Now they were wary, fearful, here is the brother they nearly murdered, the bother they sold into slavery. Her he is now, a leader of a Great power. Here he was with the power of life and death over them. Wouldn’t you be shaking in your sandals too? Joseph tells them that what happened to him was providential.

*And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.*

He could have met them with rage, violence, death, instead he forgives.

When we turn to our Gospel we are challenged by radical love, forgiveness and mercy. Words Christians often use but ae hard. It is said that on his deathbed Pope Alexander VI was asked by his Confessor if he had forgiven his enemies. His reply was “I have no enemies, I have had them all killed.”

Forgiveness is hard, mercy is hard. We can be glib with words like forgiveness, mercy, love.

This passage is hard work for preachers, for some in any given congregation these words may be comforting, liberating. For others they can be an affront, for some people this passage has been used to marginalise, silence and oppress them.

Sometimes these words have been shamefully wielded by the Church. We think of the clerical abuse scandals in a range of churches and religious communities and how religious institutions have sought to manage these in house and coerced forgiveness - or at least the appearance of forgiveness – and silence out of those who are victims of abuse.

Think of some of the terrible complicity with violence and abusers that religious communities have been party to. There are women and children who have fled from their homes to escape the drunken rampages of a perpetually violent man, who have been told by their churches, to turn the other cheek and go back and love him. And some of those women and children are now dead because of that callous and gutless misuse of this passage.

Sometimes we fail to challenge difficult, abusive, toxic unacceptable behaviour in churches because surely we are meant to forgive and that is the Christian thing to do?

So what are we to make of this passage? Well I think it helps us to read this as about her response required not so much of individuals but of communities. Still less is it addressed to individuals who have no choice but to let things go in order to get by.

Turning the other cheek is only a meaningful instruction if you can choose it as an alternative to beating the stuffing out of someone. It is no use trying to teach someone to turn the other cheek until they have learned to fight. Jesus was directing his words to those who could strike back and destroy those who had cursed them. He is saying, “Next time you are about to exercise your right of retaliation to destroy someone who has offended you, stop and think, maybe this time you could let it be like water of a ducks back.” There is a huge difference between those for whom the water of a ducks back approach is a basic survival skill in a threatening and abusive world, and those for whom it is a choice from a position of personal power. Jesus is addressing his words to the latter.

Not only do I think that Jesus is not speaking to the powerless here, I am also fairly convinced that he is not speaking primarily to individuals, especially when the hurt the enemy has inflicted has caused lasting damage. Jesus was speaking to a group, to the community of God’s people. As a group we are required to love enemies and turn the other cheek. Which means that if you think that someone in the community is in a situation where the other cheek needs to be turned, then maybe it’s your turn to go in and be hit. Maybe the other cheek is yours this time.

Some of these directions that Jesus gives in this sermon are basically impossible if you read them individually. If you turn the other cheek every time and give your shirt to everyone who asks for your coat you will be battered and cold and naked in no time at all, but if a community handles the situation together it may actually be possible to live this stuff out.

We the community gathered around Jesus are called to the love and forgiveness we sense in his story and in God at work with him.

Love as we are loved, give mercy as we have been shown mercy

As we gather here week by week in memory of one who has loved us unconditionally and unreservedly, we come to commit ourselves to follow in the ways of Jesus, to love above and beyond the call of duty. We come as a people who have known pain, who have been hurt, but who have begun to discover the cleansing healing love of God, and who are responding by learning to love as we are loved.

May it be so among us Amen