

North Kildonan United Church

16th August 2020 – Rev. Don Johnson

Genesis 45: 1-15

Matthew 15: 21-28

*Eternal God,
in the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;
in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;
and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.*

One of the great hymn writers of the 20th century was the late Reverend Fred Kaan. Our 1971 Red Hymn book and Voices United, our current hymn book, each contain a number of his compositions.

One of his hymns in Voices United, written to be sung to the tune St Agnes, the tune used for *O Valiant Hearts*, became a Remembrance Sunday standard hymn in many churches.

God, as with silent hearts we bring to mind how hate and war diminish humankind, we pause, and seek in worship to increase our knowledge of the things that make for peace ... Hallow our will, as humbly we recall the lives of those who gave and give their all.

One obituary for Fred offered these thoughts:

"Hymns are the life-blood of Protestant spirituality. What the faithful sing is far closer to their hearts than what they read in sacred texts or hear from preachers. The Rev Fred Kaan, who has died aged 80, was the foremost of a new generation of post-second world war hymn-writers expressing the dreams of an emerging new humanity. His theology reflected a God committed to and immersed in a world crying out to be set free from every form of injustice. Fred's poetry centred on a Jesus who embraced the whole of creation and excluded no one and nothing from his love. In Fred, the Christian peace movement found its voice."

Born in the Netherlands in 1929, his teenage years were spent under the Nazi occupation, an experience that never left him. His parents were involved in the resistance movement and they hid a young Jewish woman and a political prisoner in their home during the war. As Fred once said: "Emerging from the war a committed pacifist, I became interested in the faith and began the study of theology and psychology at Utrecht University,"

In time Fred would immigrate to England, learn English and become a Congregationalist minister. Occasionally his use of language was slightly awkward, perhaps intentionally so. In his hymn "Praise the Lord with Joyful Cry", the second verse reads this way: "*Praise him with the sound that swings, with percussion, brass and*

strings. Let the world at every chance praise him with a song and dance." A noted professor of English took great offence at the last four words of that verse. To give someone a song and dance is to string them along with a complicated and perhaps not true story, often a series of excuses about some action or inaction. Is that the proper way to praise God, the professor wondered.

Another of his hymns found in the Red Hymn Book but not in our current Voices United is "Lord, As We Rise to Leave". Soon after the Red Hymn Book was published, a service was held in one of Canada's great and highly ornate churches. Questions were raised once again as the first verse was sung, which began: "*Lord, as we rise to leave this shell of worship.*" The clergy, immensely proud of their church home, resented the suggestion that their church was a mere shell, nothing more than something like a barn or a warehouse. If nothing else, Fred's use of language got them, and all others, thinking.

But it's the words that follow that we should ponder.

"Lord, as we rise to leave this shell of worship, called to the risk of unprotected living, willing to be at one with all your people, we ask for courage."

The risk of unprotected living. In just a few words, Fred has encapsulated the reality of life, the fragility of life, especially in these pandemic days.

What does it mean to be unprotected? On one level it suggests vulnerability, danger, risk. But it also suggests freedom, trusting in one's abilities and skills, taking responsibility for life and living fully the life we have.

For Christian folk there is a tension between believing that all aspects of our lives are guided by divine providence, that God intervenes in both history and in our own lives, that everything that happens has a purpose to it and that in the fullness of time all will be revealed.

That is one approach. The other approach, the other side of the tension if you will, is that God is not intimately involved with human life, that God does not come down and fix everything, and that humans must take responsibility for their actions and live with the consequences.

I suspect that most of us are somewhere in the middle between these two perspectives, and that depending upon what is going on in our lives we move closer to one perspective or the other. Joy, sorrow, illness, health, prosperity, relationships and more can all influence how we understand God's place in our lives or if we believe God is in our life. Some people are able to see their lives blessed while others may perhaps not feel so blessed. For many, it is often afterwards, in looking back and coming through whatever was challenging them, that they see the hand of God in their lives, often working through the kindness of others.

Recently Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, one-time Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, was interviewed on the CBC radio programme Tapestry by Mary Hynes. She asked him about the first time he visited Auschwitz, and wondered what effect that had on his belief in God.

The visit affected his faith in humanity, not in God. He said the Holocaust and other such atrocities happen when people refuse to hear the word of God. Where was God at Auschwitz is a common question since 1945. Rabbi Sacks says God was there in the words *"thou shalt not murder"*, *"thou shalt not oppress the stranger"*, *"thou shalt not spill your brother's blood"*. When God speaks and humans refuse to listen to God, then even God is powerless, because God does not intervene. God did not say he would get us out of everything. God teaches us, God does not control us. Faith in God which saves us, he says, is God's faith in us.

A perspective worth hearing and worth pondering.

How does all this mesh with our reading from Genesis?

Today we are at chapter 45. Much has happened since our last reading. Joseph has gone from being sold to slave traders to becoming the second most powerful person in Egypt. The last time he saw his brothers, they were counting the money from his sale into captivity. Now his brothers are starving and much the worse for wear. The tables have completely turned. The dreams Joseph had about his brothers paying him homage have come to pass, as have Pharaoh's dreams about years of famine eating up the years of plenty.

The brothers are oblivious to who they are actually dealing with. To them, Joseph is a powerful Egyptian who seems to be playing with them, hiding the money they paid for grain within the load they are taking home. Further, this strange Egyptian holds one brother hostage while demanding that the youngest brother be brought to Egypt.

Why such a request?

As Joseph tests his brothers with his requests, he is trying to ascertain their state of mind. Have they changed or are they as ruthless as they were all those years ago? He sees that they have matured, that they are not willing to sacrifice another brother—instead the brother who sold Joseph is now prepared to risk his own life for his youngest brother.

Joseph now has a choice. He has the power to imprison his brothers, in fact to even execute them. But convinced of their remorse, of their awareness of their wrongdoing, Joseph opens up his arms in welcome and declares: "I am Joseph". He forgives them and absolves them of guilt, washing away the pain of their betrayal. As one commentator says, *"Joseph learns who they have become, chooses to bring them closer, speaks the truth and then forgives."*

As we look at the story of Joseph, a shepherd boy who through the misadventure of others becomes in time a great and mighty administrator, how do we understand what happened?

Joseph must have understood these events as having a purpose behind them. He was betrayed by his brothers yet that betrayal later placed him in a situation, a station in life, which enabled him to save countless people from starvation. And he did that through interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, an interpretation skill he believed came from and was directed by God. Joseph comes to realize that his life is the means of grace by which God will save the people.

To our modern mind, it would be wrong to assume that God encouraged the brothers to discard Joseph or that God caused the seven years of famine. Or that God would inflict over twenty years of grief on Jacob when he was told, wrongly, that his son Joseph was dead. Or that it was part of God's will that Joseph should languish in prison, sentenced to a crime he never committed. Perhaps it's more helpful to believe that out of a bad situation God can bring life and hope.

But then I guess we are back to the question of divine providence verses unprotected living. I don't know how many times, in the days leading up to a wedding, people will jokingly or otherwise ask me to pray for good weather that day. Give us a bright, sunny, dry day they may want, even though the fields are cracking with lack of rain and plants are withering on the vine. Dry weather for some can mean disaster for others. So when I am asked to pray for ideal wedding weather I merely respond that I am in sales, not management and have no say in the weather patterns.

Yet having said that, the story of Joseph tells us that God is still with us in our joys and sorrows and that while not sending disaster, God's spirit is at work in us and others to do the right thing, to be agents of grace and love and hope.

God's love is at work in our lives. God seeks us in good times and in bad, when we are lost and when we are found, when we are filled with doubt and when we are abounding in faith. Like so much that is profoundly important to us, God's presence with us is a mystery, a mystery on which we can build our lives and base our hopes.

We began this sermon with the words of Fred Kaan. Let us end with the final verse of Michael Perry's hymn O God beyond All Praising, one of the finest texts in Voices United.

*Then hear O gracious Saviour, this song of praise we sing.
May we, who know your favour, our humble service bring;
And whether our tomorrows be filled with good or ill,
We'll triumph through our sorrows and rise to bless you still
To marvel at your beauty and glory in your ways
And make a joyful duty our sacrifice of praise.*