

**Sermon: 2020/08/16 (11th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) -
*Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a,29-32; Matthew
15:10-28_BTR***

In America - and in Britain too, (where I am from) - we're full of pride, aren't we?
About how "advanced" we are.

We look back at history with so much derision; with so much scorn.

We compare our iPhones with their steam-engines; our airplanes with their water-wheels; our guns with their spears, and our chests swell with accomplishment; with *superiority*.

But perhaps we should be cautious.

- about the progress we think we've made.

Perhaps we should be cautious about imagining ourselves a vastly improved people.

Look again at the Old Testament reading - at these verses taken from the end of (the Book of) *Genesis*:

What we see is that *ancient* Egypt was, to a surprising degree, a *meritocracy*.

A *colour-blind* "meritocracy."

What do I mean?

Well, Joseph was raised to being 'overseer' of that kingdom's affairs because *he was good at it*.

And that's it.

It didn't matter that he was a *Syrian*.

A Jew.

From *Canaan*.

Who cared?

Not Pharaoh.

It didn't matter that Joseph's skin-colour was different to Pharaoh's.

The only thing that mattered was whether Joseph could do the job better than anyone else could do it - *and he could*.

He had a *gift*.

A talent.

A God-given flair for management and logistics and organization and all that kind of boring stuff.

And no one said to him: "Oh no, this position isn't for people who look like you."

And we know that he *did* stand out from the general population by his "looks" - that he, *visibly*, inhabited an ethnic *minority* in that society:

the Egyptians, you see, were very careful - *meticulous* - about their rock-art - they

were always decorating palaces and temples and other public-buildings with these slightly raised 2D reliefs that adorned the walls, and in them they would depict - with chisel and hammer - the various people-groups that existed in and around their kingdom.

They would show them with different clothing and haircuts.

They weren't even embarrassed to reflect undeniable ethnic differences in physiognomy - that's facial features.

They saw these things in the world around them and so...carved them.

Some groups - like the Nubians (to the south) had broader, flatter noses; others had angular, pointy ones, and so on.

They would then add mineral-based pigments and dyes to the stone's surface. Reds from powdered iron ore, green from oxidised copper, black from crushed charcoal, etc.

Semites - like Joseph, a Jew, were painted in these rock wall-reliefs with a caricatured yellow skin, because that's how it seemed to the slightly darker Egyptians.

They weren't, then - the Egyptians, oblivious to the obvious.

But *none* of this - skin-colour, ethnic difference - had any bearing *at all* on the fact that Joseph *proved* himself to be the best man for the job (of preparing Egypt against famine and food-shortages).

And this was about four *thousand* years ago.

Let that sink in.

Four *thousand* years ago, in Egypt, it was possible for a man to be whatever he wanted to be, and the color of his skin was of little consequence.

It wasn't worthy of comment.

It was *uninteresting*.

And *this* is how it is supposed to be in the Church.

We are called to be color-blind.

We really are.

And I know that this is an unfashionable suggestion.

Every segment on the nightly news right now; every journalist's story in the national papers seem obsessed with the complexion of the victim and the complexion of the perpetrator.

The pressure to view the world through *this* prism is relentless at the moment.

And I know too that there are voices who would say today that those who say we should over-look so-called "race" - like I am saying - are themselves racist; that I am racist. [\[n.1\]](#)

But it is a lie.

It is a "lie" because, as the Bible makes clear, there is only *one* "race" and it is *Adam's* race; and it is, as Saint Paul just told us this morning in the Epistle, 'all' of it

- 'all' of "Adam's race," 'imprisoned...in disobedience'

(Doomed to sin; doomed by sin.)

This is the message that we *need* to hear in the West:

about Adam's *one* "race," 'all' of it *equally* imperilled.

This is the message that both justifiably condemns *much* of this nation's past, particularly, perhaps, in this place - Tennessee, *and* promises to *liberate* our present.

The external stuff, on the other hand - whether my hair is curly or straight, whether my eyes are blue or brown, whether my ancestry lies in Africa or Alaska - *is a distraction*.

A *devilish* "distraction."

And it should be *uninteresting* to the Christian.

This is the point that Jesus was trying to get the Pharisees to understand in the gospel.

They were *sooo(!)* caught up with saying who was right and who was wrong, and the calculus they were using to make those judgements was *purely* about the superficial, *external* stuff:

about who had had their foreskin removed and who hadn't.

About who was eating pork and who wasn't.

About the length of beards;

about what constituted proper, *cleansing* hand-washing;

about whether another person's Sabbath rest was sufficiently restful or too strenuous.

About whether you were descended from Abraham or, by an accident of birth entirely beyond your control, happened to be born somewhere else to people who weren't.

And how many angels dance on a pin-head.

And it *exasperated* Jesus.

(This "relentless" focus on the trivialities of the "external.")

It "exasperated" Jesus because what He saw was a lot of *well-intentioned* energy that was being *wasted* on matters *uninteresting* to God; with *no* bearing on whether a person would be able to stand before Him on Judgment Day and be preserved, or would be thrown down to damnation.

"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted[. Will[. B]e[. U]prooted." He says to them.

That is, extinguished.

And He was referring, of course, to those who weren't 'planted' - that is, baptised and "born again" - into the Church; among His redeemed saints.

It is about *this* topic that we should be singularly passionate.

This *division*. - between the "saved" and the "Lost."

Which is why when Jesus' disciples - the Apostles - asked that He send away a desperate, *non-Jewish* woman from 'the district of Tyre' (an ancient city in what is today Lebanon), He does the *very* opposite:

Rather than dismiss her He gives her His *full* attention.

And, by a clever examination; a brief but shrewd interrogation, determined the only thing that interested Him - that she knew and loved and feared the Lord.

That she understood, in other words, who the Creator is - a perfect and holy judge - and that in comparison she was - as a sinner - a 'dog'.

This is remarkably *faithful* thing to say.

And by that I mean it took someone *full* of faith to see this self-deprecating, humbling truth, which applies to us all.

Are we inclined to say the same about ourselves?

To see the world in the *same* way?

To resist being carried away by the distraction of a lie - about race-s, and, instead, to put our energy and interest in the things of God.

Footnotes:

1. See, for example: Stafford, Zach (26th of January, 2015), 'When You Say You "Don't See Race," You're Ignoring Racism, Not Helping to Solve It', *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/26/do-not-see-race-ignoring-racism-not-helping>, (accessed August 14, 2020).

THIS IS A HUGELY IMPORTANT CONVERSATION, AND THE MOST THAT ANY SERMON CAN EVER DO IS "SCRATCH THE SURFACE" OF A TOPIC. IF YOU DISAGREE, I'D LOVE TO HEAR WHY.

Further reading:

E.g.: The work of George Yancey, such as *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (2006), available for purchase at <https://www.ivpress.com/beyond-racial-gridlock>. See his blog too: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/shatteringparadigms/>.