

A Christian Attitude

Readings: Genesis chapter 45, verses 1-8; Romans chapter 8, verses 28-38

I don't know what you thought about that reading from Genesis. I recoiled in horror! You remember the story. Joseph was his father's favourite son; the blue-eyed boy of the family. The sign of which was a coat of many colours which Joseph insisted on parading. Its not surprising that they took the first opportunity to get rid of him. They sold him as slave to a passing caravan on its way to Egypt and told his father that wild animals had got him. Years later a famine hit Palestine and Joseph's father sent his sons to Egypt to buy food. They got the shock of their lives when they discovered that Joseph had not only survived but had become Minister of Agriculture in the Egyptian Government. Our reading this morning picks up the story at the point when Joseph confronts the brothers who had sold him into slavery. They were terrified out of their minds, fearful that Joseph would take his revenge on them. And then comes Joseph's reaction. "Don't panic! No need to be afraid. It was not you that sent me here but God. God sent me before you to preserve life".

That's the bit that causes me to do a double-take. As far as Joseph was concerned all that had happened was part of a Divine Plan. God who determines all things from the beginning had organised events to turn out this way. Nothing was fortuitous. It had all been planned. And purposed.

There are people today who think as Joseph did. Whatever happens to them is all part of the Plan and Purpose of God. A college friend of mine went to Turkey on his summer vacation and came back ashen faced. He had taken a taxi in Teheran and the driver put his hand hard down on the hooter, his foot hard down on the accelerator and drove like a bat out of Hell. When my friend protested the driver simply said, "It is as Allah wills". And I find that view of life impossible to stomach.

Or I am reminded of the Sunday School teacher who told the story of David killing the giant Goliath with a stone slung from his catapult. One little girl put her hand up - "Please Miss. What if the giant had ducked?" And the teacher answered "Then that little stone sure would have ducked as well".

"It is as God wills". Many people think of their lives in this way. Everything happens for a purpose and that purpose is dictated by God.

That might be a comforting thing to believe but you know and I know that life is not like that. The reason is simple. Each one of us has the freedom to choose and to act as we will and those choices and actions alter whatever destiny we might have. Nothing is predestined and pre-determined.

That's why I balanced the Old Testament story of Joseph with what Paul said in his letter to the Christians in Rome. "We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love Him and are called according to His purpose." That is a very different way of looking at things. Paul does not say that God is the cause of everything that happens in our lives, least of all does he say that everything that happens to us is God's Will. But what he does say is that God is at work in all things, the good and the bad, and that if we co-operate with Him then God can turn all things into a final good.

The best example of this is the Cross of Christ. I cannot for a moment believe that God sent Jesus into our world for the express purpose of dying on a Cross. The crucifixion of Christ was an evil act perpetrated by sinful men. The Pharisees demanded his death because he threatened to undermine the very basis of their faith. Pilate consented to his death because he was an ambitious man and would not let Truth stand in the way of his ambition. The mob cried out for his crucifixion because they were whipped up into an unthinking frenzy. The Cross of Christ was the result of a

conspiracy of evil. Lets not try and pretend otherwise. But God used this evil in such a way that the Cross has become the means and symbol of our salvation.

So it is for us. Bad things happen to us. Sometimes through our own fault, and very often through the fault of others. But it is not the end of the world for us and the words of Paul contain an essential truth. God works in all things for good.

But let us not be complacent. For Paul qualified that statement. "God works in all things for good with those who love Him". In other words there is nothing inevitable about how things will turn out. It all depends on whether we are prepared to co-operate with Him or not. If we insist on doing our own thing and going our own way regardless then the likelihood is that things will turn out badly for us. But if we really do try to co-operate with Him then God can turn the eventual outcome to good.

Every time I read these words of Paul I think of my cousin and how they worked out in her life. She was just 18 when she got her A-Level results and that evening her Dad took her out to celebrate. On the way a drunken driver collided with their car. Her Dad was killed. Frances was paralysed from the neck down. She was flown to from Rhodesia to Stoke Mandeville for treatment but they could do nothing. For the next 40 years Frances lived in a wheelchair in a Cheshire Home. But she had a Christian Faith which did not allow her to think that this was God's Will. So even from a wheelchair she co-operated with God to bring an ultimate good from this evil. She taught in the Sunday School at her local Church. She learned to paint with her mouth and produced Christmas cards for charity. She was unfailingly cheerful and she had an amazing impact for good on all who knew her. In one word her life was an inspiration.

God works in all things for good with those who love Him. In all things! Not just the good things. And the challenge to us is not to sit back and bemoan our fate but so to co-operate with God that whatever happens is turned to an ultimate good.