

Text: Genesis 39; 1 Peter 1:13-21

Sunday 17th April 2016

Juniper Green Parish Church

I wonder, I wonder what words you would use to describe God? Are the words you would choose, positive words? Would you use words such as loving, kind, powerful, all-knowing, or gracious? Or does your picture of God use very different words? Is He distant, uncaring, uninterested, or in a bad mood? Sometimes how we answer these questions depends very much on the situation we are in. It is a lot easier to use positive words, when things are going positively for us. Much harder to keep using them, when life is tough. And what words, may I ask, do you think God would use to describe you, or to describe this church community? Would they be positive? Would He use different words for us depending on the situation we find ourselves in?

I've titled today's sermon "Loyalty", for it seems to me that this particular episode in the life of Joseph speaks of loyalty; both of God to Joseph, and Joseph to God. And in that two-way relationship of loyalty, I think we see the potential for something good to happen.

But let's start with the first point. That even in the midst of trials, God proves Himself loyal to His people. We see this picked up several times in this one chapter. Again and again we read that "the Lord was with Joseph" (v2, 3, 21, 23). Joseph, rejected by his brothers, sold into slavery, taken a great distance from his home, made to work for an oppressive regime, faced with temptation repeatedly, slandered, wrongly accused, falsely imprisoned – and yet aware that God, the Lord, was with Him, was loyal to Joseph, was faithful, was present – even in the midst of the trials.

It is especially stressed in v21 when we read that the Lord "showed him kindness" (NIV). Now the choice of the word "kindness" in this translation, possibly hinders what is being conveyed here. The Hebrew word is *hesed*. It is one of the most important words in the Old Testament for it is a covenant word, implying the kind of loyalty and behaviour that one might expect from a marriage partner. Another translation puts it as "steadfast love", and still another "faithful love". In the story of Joseph it reinforces the idea that God was loyal to Joseph; that God showed Joseph *hesed*, steadfast love, faithful love, covenant loyalty – and Joseph knew it and would have described God with those kind of words.

I go back to one of my earlier questions. How would you describe God? Would you say with Joseph that God is loyal? That He has shown you *hesed*, His steadfast love? If you read the recent Spring edition of the church newsletter, you will know a little of the trials that my wife and I have faced over the last year, it has been the

toughest of years. I've been told by my own minister that grief takes two or more years to process, so it is still very early days for us, and even after those two years, the grief will always stay with us to some degree. In the midst of all we've faced, throughout the whole journey, my sense is that God has been loyal to us. Sure we've got questions. Yes, we would have wanted things to have gone differently. But my feeling, 8 months on from Ethan's death, is that God has been loyal. He has journeyed with us, He has carried us, He has listened, He has comforted, He has given us support, and He has given us hope. That hope is not only for this life, it is not only about the child we are expecting in four months' time, it is an eternal hope, a hope which means that one day we will see Ethan again, and I look forward to introducing you all to him. This hope is only available and secure because God has been loyal – to us, to this world. As we read in 1st Peter verses 18-19, "For...you were redeemed...with the precious blood of Christ". God has been supremely loyal to us – even though we didn't deserve it, He showed His steadfast love to us in sending Jesus and calling us to faith in Him. He need not have done it, He owed us nothing, we had turned our backs on Him – and yet He had a plan, "from before the creation of the world", to rescue us and give us a sure hope. Amidst all my doubts, all my questions, all the hurt and dark times, this one act alone convinces me that God has been loyal – and that He will continue to be loyal.

Do you know this loyal God? Can you see His loyalty to you in Jesus? Maybe that's the key message for you to take away today; that God has been loyal and will be loyal, to you. Of course, maybe you need a fresh sense of that, a fresh conviction about God's loyalty to you - and I believe God would want to give you that. If that is your need this morning, if that is the raw nerve that this message touches, can I encourage you to go to Him? To seek, to ask for that fresh sense of His loyalty, for He has promised that we will find and we will receive when we seek and ask. If you are not sure how to go about that, please go and speak to Jim, or maybe an elder that you trust. There probably won't be a quick fix, but there are means and ways of seeking, of asking, of creating space to receive from God. As you do that, I believe God will help you come to a place, where you can say with conviction, even in the midst of trials, that God is loyal to us and will always be loyal.

But maybe you know this, maybe you are convinced of this, just like Joseph was. Well then, what effect does it have? What effect did it have in the life of Joseph? As we see in the story, Joseph responds in loyalty to God's loyalty. He principally shows this in his words and behaviour towards Potiphar's wife. Again and again she makes advances towards him, and again and again he turns her down. Another person might have thought it was ok, that in some way it was deserved; or that it wasn't really a big deal.

Well Joseph sees things differently. At the end of his speech to Potiphar's wife he says, "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (v9) – and there's the truth. That the worst thing in sin is that it is against

God. So when we choose sin we are acting against His ways, against His design, against His love – rejecting it all, throwing it back in His face, telling Him that we know better. But Joseph chose otherwise, because he doesn't minimise sin and he recognises sin for what it truly is. Joseph had experienced the loyalty of God, the steadfast *hesed* love of God, and in response he lived in loyalty to God, and fled from sin.

To us he is an example, and his actions call us to live likewise. Again Peter writes about this in the passage that we read for he said, “just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (v15-16). Often we think of holiness as just being morally good, of being a good person, a nice person, or being a “goodie two shoes”. But really holiness goes much deeper because true holiness calls for deep loyalty. When something is holy, it is said to be devoted to God, belonging to God alone, separated from ordinary use, and marked for a sacred purpose. And often blood from a sacrifice would be the means by which that person, or thing, or place would be made holy. And guess what? We are a people who have been redeemed with the blood of Jesus, as Peter said in v19, so we are called to holiness; we belong to God, we are set apart, our whole lives are to be devoted to Him and His purposes and ways. Holiness is a deep loyalty to God, and from that will come a godly lifestyle. But it begins with the heart, with being given over to God, holding nothing back from Him.

In the case of Joseph, in response to God's loyalty, Joseph was loyal to God, and it meant for him that he fled from sin. But loyalty can be described in the positive choices we make too, not simply the things we turn from. We can show loyalty to God in how we use our time, our money, our talents; in whom we serve; in giving time to meet with God through prayer and reading the Bible. And we are called to holiness at a corporate level too. And so we are warned against gossip and against having factions; we are exhorted to speak only what will build others up and to follow the example of the early church in making known the love of God and of salvation through Jesus.

So where is God calling you to show Him loyalty? Where is He calling us, as a community, to show Him loyalty? He has been loyal to You and is calling you to respond in loyalty to Him. Is there a part of life, individually or corporately, that needs to change?

As a final point, it is fascinating in the story to see that the two-way relationship of loyalty between God and Joseph, has an effect, not only on Joseph but on others around him. We read at the beginning and the end of the chapter, that not only was the Lord with Joseph, but He blessed Joseph and this overflowed to others; the MSG translation put v3 as: “God was working for good in everything he [Joseph] did.” Joseph was a kind of

conduit for the blessing of God. But then this really shouldn't be a surprise, for God had told his great great grandfather – that is Abraham – these very words:

“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing...
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

God's loyalty had started back with Abraham and continued through to Joseph's own day, and as Joseph responded in loyalty to God then God's blessing would be upon him and flow through him to others. Of course it wasn't a guarantee of an easy life, we see that clearly with Joseph, but living in loyalty as a response to God's loyalty would allow God's blessing to come, to change lives, to transform situations, to help others see that God alone is God, that He is good and that He is at work in this world for the good of this world.

This participation in the purposes of God, was not only for Abraham and Joseph, it is for us too. A little later in his letter, Peter says, “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession” (1 Peter 2:9). These words would acted as a reminder for the early Christians and taken them back to those very words God had said to Abraham: that through His people living in loyalty to Him, God would bring blessing to the nations. But we see time and time again through Israel's story that we can't have one without the other; blessing does not come in response to disloyalty – through disloyalty we grieve; we grieve God when we turn from Him, from His ways, from devotion to Him and His purposes. Yet when we – individually and corporately – respond in loyalty to God's great loyalty, then we can become a conduit for God's blessing to come and change lives.

In thinking about how to illustrate this point, I was reminded of my friend Ollie. Of all the people I know, he probably shows the greatest amount of loyalty to God: in his day-to-day lifestyle, in his priorities, his choices, in the ways he seeks to serve God and others, in how he uses his time and his money. I don't think it is a coincidence that he also has the most incredible stories to tell of the people he has met, the places he has been, and the ways he has seen God make a difference in people's lives. In my own life, he has had a profound influence, and my wife and I have been blessed with his friendship – especially over the last year. Every single way in which anyone's life has been just a little bit better through the help, love and time Ollie has given them, is a sign of God's goodness and blessing overflowing through him...because it all stems from Ollie choosing to live in loyalty to God. If he had chosen to walk in less loyalty to God, then I am convinced that he would have

missed out on so much! But significantly, others would have missed out too. By living in loyalty to God, Ollie has revealed to others what God is like and they have experienced God's loyalty, His *hesed* steadfast love. Ollie illustrates the point that as we live in loyalty to God, we can become a conduit of God's blessing to those around us.

So, God has been loyal to you, how will you live in loyalty to Him?

Let us pray.