

GENESIS 42-45
GRACE-SHAPED RELATIONSHIPS

Other people – how much easier life would be if it wasn't for other people! The hardest thing we have to do is get on with other people. School life would be so much better as an experience for young people if their relationships were not soured by bullying! Office life would be better without the office gossip round the water cooler. Life in your street would be better if the neighbours didn't have a loud dog or kept their hedge under control! There are so many issues that cause us stress in life that we would directly relate to "other people". But then I suppose these same other people will say the same about us! We meet other people in our families, at work, at school, across the garden fence, in the clubs and groups of which we are members, in our blocks of flats, in churches, and how we get on with other people wherever we meet them is one of the hardest tests of our lives.

There is another side to that, of course. Our relationships with other people are the most precious parts of our lives at times. There is a love that we share with other people and without that love we would be poorer people; the contact we have with others is stimulating, encouraging, and supporting and there are so many other ways in which we can describe benefits and blessings that we give to and gain from other people. We can worship God on our own, but how much better when we worship with others, when we sing together, pray together, read the Bible together, grow together in our love for God and in our faith; there is something inspiring about that! We have a deep sense of community in the church when we realise that what God has done in us, He has done in everyone else in the room in some way or another too; that draws us together as a community of faith. This sense of community will be such a significant thing as we look to the future!

A key theme in story of Joseph is family life! How do these people get on with each other? At the start of the story it is all very messy: dad has a favourite and gives him the best presents; the teenage son is a brat and tells tales on his big brothers; the big brothers are full of jealousy and hate and it all gets very messy; so much so that, in the end, the big brothers sell the brat as a slave and tell dad that he is dead! On top of all that, Joseph has told everyone that one day he will be a great man and they will all have to bow down to him! There is nothing there that makes for good family relationships really! Since then, Joseph has been a slave, has spent time in prison unjustly, and has now come to greatness and his brothers have been living with the lies they told to their father. How is this all going to work out? What is God doing?

Today's story is the last in this little series and rounds it all up, ties up the loose ends and resolves the family. It all revolves round famine for Jacob's family and food in Egypt. The famine has arrived as God promised; Joseph has spent seven years storing up grain so that when this day arrived there would still be food. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food. "*When...*" (*Genesis 42:6*) Dreams do come true – the brothers bow down before Joseph just as his dreams had promised. But it seems not to matter to Joseph now! Something else has happened that matters much more: he saw his brothers and recognised them at once; it was an emotional moment! The last time he had seen them they were selling him to a caravan train of merchants as a slave for the markets of Egypt and covering his coat with blood to tell dad that he'd been eaten by a wild animal. Now, here they are together again: Joseph knows them, but they don't know him. How will Joseph behave?

I wonder what your instinctive reaction would be if you were in Joseph's shoes? "Here's my chance to get my own back?" Revenge is in air? Revenge is a dish best served cold, they say and Joseph has had plenty of time to concoct a scheme by which he

can get his revenge. I suppose you could read these chapters 42-45 in that way, that here is Joseph getting his revenge on his brothers. In fact, it is more subtle than that and there seems to be no spirit of revenge. Joseph is playing with them a bit, but they are never in any real danger. Is Joseph forgiving or vindictive? There are several things that he does to make them think!

1. He accuses them of being spies, and that makes them slightly scared!
2. He gives them their grain for nothing, putting their money back in their sacks; when they find it, they are slightly more scared; "we can't go back!" they say.
3. He makes them bring his only full-brother Benjamin back with them and they have tea together; he sits the brothers round the table in age-order, and he gives Benjamin five times more food than the rest.
4. He hides his cup in Benjamin's sack and then sends a servant to chase and arrest the 'thief!'

What's going on here? Well, let's eavesdrop on the brothers, which is what Joseph is doing too! They are trying to work all of this out for themselves. "*Surely we...*" (*Genesis 42:21*) Judah says, about taking Benjamin, "*If I...*" (*Genesis 43:9*) "*Please let...*" (*Genesis 44:33*) We have said before that Joseph has been changed by his experience of life and by all of this we see here his brothers are also changed and chastened by their experience. We left them before with jealousy and hate in their hearts, but Joseph sees something very different now; he sees men who love their father and have a deep sense of love and responsibility for one another. He loved them from the first moment he saw them and loves them still. "*I am Joseph!*" and there is a great family reunion.

A vindictive Joseph would have done different things. A vindictive Joseph might have sent all these 'spies' to prison; "let them taste what I've had to put up with all these years; it serves them right!" A vindictive Joseph might have taken their money, but sent them home with sacks full of rubbish rather than grain; he had the power and authority even to refuse to sell them food, with no need to tell them who was doing this or why. A vindictive Joseph might have behaved very differently, but Joseph is not shaped by vindictiveness or revenge; Joseph is shaped by the grace and mercy of God and so deep in his heart there is a spirit of kindness, even forgiveness and he treats them as if they had done nothing wrong. He loves them; he cares for them; in the end the whole family come to live in Egypt where they will be safe. "*God sent...*" (*Genesis 45:7*)

Jesus told His friends: "*A new...*" (*John 13:34f*) He spent a lot of time teaching them about love and the quality of their relationships and what kind of impact that would make on their world. When they were arguing about which of them was the greatest, they were to learn to serve; when they watched Him wash their feet, they were to learn to serve. When someone asked about the most important values in life they heard Him speak about love for God and for your neighbour and that your neighbour is anyone in need. The quality of love is something to be valued above everything else. It is the way we should be! There can be no argument. Jesus has commanded us to love one another and to let grace shape our relationships with one another and with other people. It is a value and a quality that should go all way through our church life; when you buy a stick of Blackpool rock you discover that all the way through the rock is the word Blackpool; all way through the church should be the word 'love'; scratch us and we should bleed love for other people and for one another.

Paul in Romans 12 has described what love looks like in a church. Sincere; be devoted to one another as family; put others before ourselves; hospitality; love your enemies; rejoice with those who have good news, mourn with those who mourn; harmony; humility; forgiveness; care for those who are poor, even your enemies. Read it again when you go home; these are the qualities and values of love; these are grace-shaped

relationships that are to be found in churches. We live in a world where life is lived by very a different set of values at times, the 'me-generation' where people simply seem to be interested in themselves and no-one else; a world where revenge is the order of day and vindictiveness lives in the hearts and minds of some; social media is often a vehicle for that because you can abuse people from a distance! The Church is to be different and we are to make sure that we are different. The hardest thing we ever do is to relate to other people; make sure we do that in a way shaped by the grace of God.

Can get it very wrong: Christians can be very exacting of one another; I have met lots of people who have walked away from church bruised and battered by the way they have been treated; I have friends and colleagues who have walked away from ministry for the very same reason. There are no grounds for complacency here. Two ladies were neighbours, one lived above the other. Something happened and one spoke to the husband of the other in a critical way, blamed him for something! As a result, the wife of the husband said something back and for thirty years they never spoke to one another; the feud only ended when one of them died. They were both members of the same church and people in the church knew about this feud; the minister certainly knew about it and had tried to build bridges; but they simply refused; revenge and vindictiveness shaped that relationship for years and grace never a chance. That's an extreme example, and we know churches are never perfect, but let that not be an excuse!

I found this image on Facebook this week and thought it would be a good place to finish this reflection on our relationships. "One kind word can change someone's entire day". That can be our challenge for this week, to speak a kind word to someone and change their day! They might be expecting a harsh word, a critical word, but how about a kind word? Joseph's story ends with kind words. The story ends with the family reunited, saved by the grace of God at work in the life of Joseph; looking back on his life he sees God's hand, God's grace shaping his destiny; he didn't see it at the start, when jealousy and hatred marked their family relationships. But the grace of God has changed these brothers and in the end they live safely and happily together as God provides for them. A vindictive Joseph would have behaved very differently than Joseph shaped by grace! Are our relationships shaped by grace? One kind word? See what happens!