

Sermon for Evensong on the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, 28th July 2019

Genesis 42:1-25; 1 Corinthians 10:1-24 - see

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=431234927>

Imagine that you are sitting in your study at the end of this momentous week. In the week you have enjoyed a rollercoaster day watching the first day of the first-ever Test Match against Ireland at Lord's, seeing the wonderful Irish team skittle out the world champions, England, for 85 runs, and then making a decent first innings total. Something seems to be going on. Normal expectations have been completely confounded (although things did go more according to expectation later).

Then you have watched the change of Prime Minister and the enormous upheaval in the composition of the government. Are you infected with the enthusiasm of the new Prime Minister, and his great optimism, or are you apprehensive that he is about to complete the greatest act of national self-harm which has ever afflicted this country?

Again, you have been moving slowly in the heat, not sure whether it is better, as those who have lived in the tropics will tell you, to keep all the doors and windows closed, or whether to put on your Hawaiian shirt and straw hat and take a stroll in the sunshine. The sun was hotter than it has ever been before. Something is going on there as well.

Imagine that you are a preacher; that you are the Christian minister who has to deliver a sermon today, at the end of this momentous week; who has to interpret the word of God in the Bible and relate it to the world in which we find ourselves, to guide God's faithful people as we worship together - and to relate your prophetic guidance to all these things going on. Imagine - well, what is the preacher going to say?

Is he going to take refuge in some recondite Classical allusion, as our new Prime Minister did when he spoke after having been elected as leader of the Conservative Party? I don't know whether you listened to Thought for the Day on the wireless on Friday. It was by Catherine Pepinster, the Catholic commentator - I think she used to be the editor of the Tablet. She had noticed that Mr Johnson, in his first major speech as party leader, had

used the same rhetorical structure as one of the greatest speeches of Classical antiquity, which you will find in Book 2 of Thucydides' Histories, the Funeral Oration of Pericles. That was an address which was given at a public funeral in Athens for all those who had died fighting in a war.

I'll put a good translation on our website for you to read afterwards. In the speech Pericles praises the city of Athens and those qualities of Athenian life which produced the brave people who fought and died for it. Catherine Pepinster pointed out that Mr Johnson studied Classics, so he is clearly alive to the history and influence of Ancient Greece. He comes from a Roman Catholic family and was baptised as a Catholic so, she thought, our new Prime Minister would probably have in mind also the great early Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas, who brought into Christian theology a lot of the philosophy of Aristotle, arguably the greatest Classical philosopher. Aristotle, in his Nicomachean Ethics, and Thomas Aquinas, in his Summa Theologiae, identified the great moral objective, the right and the good, to be what in Greek is called εὐδαιμονία, which literally means a 'good spirit' or possibly a good 'ghost', like the Holy Ghost, or even, transliterating, a good 'demon'. Eudaemonia, perhaps best understood to mean 'flourishing', human flourishing, is the moral objective. To do good is to do whatever makes for human flourishing.

In Aristotle and in Aquinas, and in St Paul - because I'm sure that St Paul was another one who was familiar with Classical Greek philosophy, including the works of Aristotle - as we see from our lesson, from his First Letter to the Corinthians - what has to be pursued is not material goods or sensual pleasure, but the spiritual virtues. Paul quotes from the story of the blasphemous Golden Calf in Exodus (32:6), 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.'

He has in mind something like the debauched dinners that you might recall from Fellini's 'Satyricon', based on the famous Trimalchio's Dinner by Petronius, which every sixth-form Classical scholar makes sure of reading. There are celebrated passages about ladies jumping out of pies in a surprising state of undress. Paul says, All that glitters is not gold. You must, as Christians, avoid these excesses.

How do we make sense of the other things that are ‘going on’? What must we do?

Well, now I hope you are really imagining what it feels like to be your preacher. How do we deal with all these things that are ‘going on’? Let’s bring to the table the story in our first lesson. A great story - a little bit of the great story of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

You need to go away and read the whole thing. Start at Genesis chapter 37 and read through, say, to the end of chapter 47. You can skip chapter 38 before you get to our lesson in chapter 42. Again, please, imagine.

Imagine what Joseph must have felt when he realised that, there before him, asking for help, it was his brothers, his brothers who had cast him away fourteen years earlier; first they had intended to kill him, then dumped him in a pit without food and water in the middle of the desert, and then as a final afterthought, dug him out and sold him into slavery to some wandering Bedouins.

There they were, those monsters who did all that to him: and look how he treated them. He may have been a bit gruff, but look at his generosity. He gave them their money back. He tested them gently. He wanted to know how they would treat Benjamin, who had replaced him as the young one. ‘Go and get Benjamin,’ he told them.

Those brothers knew what they had done. Were they going to do it again? Of course not. They finally realised that the great governor of Egypt, the king’s right-hand man, was Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery; and that it was he who was helping them, who was giving them food, who was getting Pharaoh to invite them from Canaan, where there was famine, into the land of plenty, where Joseph had taken care, in the seven lean years, to make a storehouse of grain: look at that astonishing scene. That is surely *ευδαιμονία* in action. That is what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. That is loving your enemies, going the extra mile.

So I’ll tell you the last thing that I did in this last week. That is that I went to the launch, by our local council, Elmbridge, of our local part of a national scheme called the Safe Places scheme.[See <https://www.safeplaces.org.uk/member-schemes/elmbridge/>.]

The idea is that there will be a network of places - it could be, local businesses or organisations, or anywhere where someone who feels threatened, or in trouble in some way, or frightened, or disoriented, can go and feel safe; where someone can greet them and take them in for half an hour or an hour, and, to use an old-fashioned expression, give them sanctuary. Where they can find eudaemonia, even.

Well, of course, ever since the earliest days of the church, churches have been places of sanctuary. I hope that our church will join this scheme as soon as possible. I would invite everyone to look out for the Safe Places scheme and to support all the steps necessary to turn St Mary's into a Safe Place (capital S and capital P). Again, I'll put up references on our website.

Something is going on. Let's pray that in all these things, what it is makes for εὐδαιμονία, for human flourishing; let's hope that God's love is at its heart, and that it is in our hearts, here at St Mary's.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant