

Sermon for Year A, Proper 19

Text: Genesis 50:20

We throw around the word “luck” quite a bit. We say things like:

“Good luck for the game tomorrow”.

“With a bit of luck I’ll get through this surgery OK”.

“That was a lucky escape”.

“I’ve finally got a lucky break.”

“I haven’t worked all that hard studying for these exams but with a bit of luck I can pull off a pass”, or when we hear of some freak accident and say, “That was just bad luck. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time”.

Often we use the word “luck” without too much thought about what we are saying but the word implies a lot more than we realise. When we say “Good luck” to a sports person are we saying that he/she will need luck to win because their skills aren’t up to scratch? Do we really believe that luck will change that?

Sometimes we use “luck” to explain why something happens that can’t be explained in any other way than to say it was a matter of luck, or chance or fortune either good or bad. Fate and luck were such popular concepts in the ancient world, especially among the Greeks and Romans.

But in the Bible nothing is left to luck or chance. The Bible gives us a picture of a God who cares, listens and acts behind the scenes of human history and of our lives. His divine providence, wisdom, and foresight oversee everything that happens. Nothing happens that is outside his control. He even uses evil events and people to bring about some good end.

It would be an interesting exercise to go through the Bible to see how many times the words “*but God*” are used in the same way they are used in today’s text from Genesis. Joseph said to his brothers, “*You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good*”. The words “*but God*” involve some kind of human foolishness or disaster that God uses to bring rescue and blessing and goodness.

Even if the words “*but God*” aren’t actually in the text they could be implied anyway. For example, God commanded Jonah to call the people of Nineveh to turn away from their sinful lives. Jonah didn’t like this assignment, ran away, was swallowed by a big fish but God rescued him and saved the people of Nineveh. Or Daniel was thrown into a cage of lions but God sent an angel to shut their mouths and Daniel was unharmed. The king and all the people worshipped God. When David killed Goliath it wasn’t just a lucky shot that brought down the giant. David made this clear to Goliath, “*You might be big and mean but God will put you in my power and I will defeat you*”.

Today's reading from a story in the Book of Genesis could be read just as a good luck/bad luck kind of story. It's about Joseph, the bratty spoilt kid in the Old Testament who was given a fancy brightly coloured coat by his father, Jacob. Bad luck for his big brothers that this little kid was their father's favourite. His jealous brothers wanted to do away with the lad but it was just good luck that one of the brothers felt bad about murdering him and so Joseph was sold as a slave. Joseph ended up in Egypt and he got a lucky break and ended up in the house of a rich man. Through a stroke of bad luck he ended up in jail on a trumped up charge of rape. Then through a series of events that could be interpreted as just plain good luck ended up as prime minister to the Egyptian Pharaoh.

In the meantime bad luck struck the brothers because famine wiped out all their crops and so they had to go to Egypt to find food. To cut a long story short when the brothers found out that the Egyptian ruler with whom they had been dealing was the brother they had tried to kill, they really believed their luck had run out. This ruler had total control over them and this would be their end.

But Joseph explains to his brothers that he has no intention of getting back at them for what they had done to him. The brothers were expecting the worst but Joseph saw things differently. Joseph saw the hand of God behind everything that had happened. He explained it like this to his brothers, *"God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive. So it was not really you who sent me here, but God. He has made me the king's highest official"* (Genesis 45:7-8).

It was not by chance that Joseph had risen to a position of power and was able to help his brothers and their families. God had used all the hatred his brothers had for him to save them in the end. Joseph explains, *"You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good, in order to preserve the lives of many people today because of what happened"* (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph must have wondered, as any of us would, "Why is this happening to me?" or even asked, "God, what are you doing to me? Why are you allowing these things to happen?" It is later as he looked into the rear vision mirror on where he had been that he could say *"but God"*. All these bad things happened to me and God permitted them to happen *but God* used them to save my family and their children and the generations to come. God was behind the scenes working good into their evil purposes.

I can't go on without referring to one other *"but God"* story in the Bible. Peter tells it like this on Pentecost Day, *"Jesus was handed over to you; and you killed him by letting sinful men crucify him. But God raised him from death, setting him free from its power, because it was impossible that death should hold him prisoner (Acts 2:22-24)*. Evil was at work that first Good Friday. An innocent man captured, put on trial, whipped, mocked, cruelly treated and nailed through hands and feet to a cross. What could be more atrocious than that? What seemed to be one of the biggest

stuff ups in history becomes the very epitome of love; the beginning of the new possibilities and new hope that would come into human lives.

God used the evil on that day to bring forgiveness and eternal life into the lives of all people. We could even use Joseph's words here, *"God turned the evil into good, in order to preserve the lives of many people"*.

Whenever we hear the words *"but God"* or they are implied as God uses the circumstances in our lives to bring about good things and blessings, we know that God is always in control. There are times when he permits bad things to happen but they don't happen outside of his control. God allows them to happen for a reason and that reason is always bound up with his love for us. Sometimes and perhaps more often than not we can't see the reason why God permits bad things to happen because his ways and thoughts are far beyond ours. We can't think like God and we don't have the wisdom of God but we can trust his love.

To be sure, the story of Jesus, the cross and the tomb, the story about Joseph and his brothers say very loudly that not everything that happens is good. Horrible things happen - babies die, mothers get cancer, parents abuse children; we have Baghdad, Kabul, Tripoli, Chechnya, Auschwitz, we have famine and war in Africa where people are suffering in a way we can hardly begin to imagine. Every day's news has a story. There is no way in the world we can begin to understand why these things happen on such a massive scale. We know that God doesn't cause evil to happen; the people on this planet do a pretty good job at creating evil without any outside help.

To be sure terrible things happen in our lives—some are our own making and others seem to come out of the blue. It's not a matter of good luck or bad luck. In faith we believe that God is always close by as we travel through dark times and along unfamiliar roads. Joseph didn't know why things happened the way they did as they unfolded and he didn't have the advantage of a crystal ball to see that all the events in his life would end up bringing blessings to his family. But one thing he was certain about – God was travelling along with him.

Like Abraham who obeyed God and packed up everything and travelled to an unknown destination, like David who defied the giant Goliath, like Daniel whose obedience to God meant persecution, like Peter and the other disciples whose loyalty to Jesus made life hard and in the end cost them their lives, like Joseph who must have often wondered where life was taking him, we too are on a journey and we don't know what lies around the corner, but we do know who is travelling with us.

Don't rely on luck to get through but on the sure and certain love of God that we know through Jesus. It's the kind of love that is persistent, committed and never gives up; the kind of love that gives us peace and contentment even when we are totally confused about the events of our lives.

As you leave this worship service, my parting words to you will not be, "Good luck". Rather, I will remind you that as you go out into the world, you do not go alone; you go with each other and God goes with you. No matter what this week may bring, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will remain with you and bless and protect you and give you the peace that comes from knowing that it's not luck that controls your life but the loving hand of almighty God.