

The Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 17, 2008

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A few years ago Happy and I attended a birthday party for one of her three sisters. The party was a surprise. All sorts of people – childhood friends and neighbors from years before were invited. Of course, many of them were people from Happy's past also, and many of them remembered her. Inevitably, there were people who would come up to her and say, "I bet you don't remember me." How true. Of course she didn't. Years had gone by since she had seen them. She had changed, and they had changed. Surely you have been in that same situation; we all have. With any luck they may identify themselves, but not necessarily.

So here's Joseph in Egypt; it's sort of a homecoming party, at least for Joseph. His brothers don't have a clue. Years have gone by. Joseph has changed, really changed. Joseph is an Egyptian, or so it appears. He's in a palace, seated on a chair of gold, fanned by slaves with peacock feathers. He's wearing a sort of crown and lots of gold. He looks good.

Here are his brothers, fresh from the flocks, smelling vaguely like sheep. They are a ragtag bunch in rough clothing, with scraggly beards. They aren't very clean.

Joseph knows who they are. It's probably hard to forget the faces of people who throw you into a pit, then haul you out and sell you to a caravan of slavers. I should think that sort of thing would stay in your mind. Needless to say, the brothers do not recognize Joseph.

In all honesty, what would you do at that moment if you were Joseph? Tempting, isn't it? What a great position to be in; what a great scenario for sweet revenge. Joseph is big: he can have them jailed, made slaves, killed. There was no one to complain about it, no one to criticize him. He has an absolutely free hand.

Joseph doesn't yield to temptation. He has grown up. He has come to realize that who he is, all that he has, all his good fortune is the direct result of the brothers' one act of cruelty, the direct result of the brothers' yielding to just such temptation. Good has come from evil.

Which means, he knows that something far greater than Joseph and his brothers has been at work in the world, that it is God who has taken a hand in the life of Joseph. Joseph's faith in God has never wavered, even in the darkest moments of the pit and the prison. God has led him through those times to the present. Object Lesson Number One is that God can and does cause what we call bad to lead to good: it is one of God's many graces to His people. Object Lesson Number Two is that if God can be so gracious to Joseph, then Joseph must be gracious to others, specifically, at the moment, those scruffy, clueless brothers. He doesn't say, "Bet you don't remember me." He says, "I am Joseph."

Just who or what is Joseph? What is this story really about? Of course he's a character in Genesis, but he really is a universal. Joseph is everyone who has been abused, victimized, injured, or abandoned and has yet not lost faith. There have been, and there are today, countless Josephs.

Saint Paul was a Joseph. In the course of his ministry as a missionary, Paul was beaten, imprisoned, run out of town, all of which without

ever losing faith in the God that had sent him on the road. Strange as it may sound, the woman who confronts Jesus in this morning's Gospel is a Joseph. Faith in the healing power and presence of God brings her into Jesus' presence, and faith gives her the courage, the temerity to stay there in the face of what you and I would call rejection.

The point is, of course, that nobody, absolutely nobody, is forgotten in the sight of God; He does remember us, you and me, even if we haven't talked to Him in years.

In His Holy Name.