

Sermon on Wednesday 22 July 2020

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Reading: Genesis 50. 15-21)

Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies)

Shortlisted for the Huesca International Film Festival, 'Ome' or 'Mama', tells the story of a 9-year-old Lebanese boy called Elias as he grieves the death of his mother. Trying to comfort his son, his father tells Elias that Jesus must have needed his mother more than they did. Understandably, this prompts Elias to go to church to ask Jesus for the safe return of his mother. When that doesn't happen, he visits again, this time kidnapping the statue of the Virgin, and telling the Christ figure on the crucifix, 'When you restore my mother, I'll restore yours'.

It's one of those stories that raises a smile and breaks the heart at the same time. I have to say I have every sympathy with Elias and his hijacking of Mother Mary. Given what his father said, it was a strategic and perfectly reasonable move. The film offers a glimpse into the world of a child, and children often have a very literal way of interpreting what adults say. As children, we believed what we were told, until perhaps that shocking moment came when suddenly we realised that 'it ain't necessarily so'. I understand, of course, the comfort the father may have wished for his son in thinking that Jesus had a special reason for taking his mother

too soon. Some things, however, defy reason. Some things are just wrong. Some things don't have answers... or not yet.

A few months ago I read a book called 'Everything happens for a reason (and other lies I've loved)'. It's the moving story of Kate Bowler, a Christian living with terminal cancer and with all the questions of faith that diagnosis surfaces. In it she lists, alongside the title, unhelpful things well-meaning Christian friends have quoted to her; things like, 'God has a better plan', 'This is a test and it will make you stronger', 'If you just have enough faith.' Maybe one or more of those brings you a comfort or a perspective you find helpful, and the last thing I'd want to do is steal that from you. For me, however, that particular phrase, 'Everything happens for a reason', is very problematic. For me, a better perspective is: 'These things happen, but God is with us in it; and together we can grow through this'. Not as catchy, I'll admit!

In our reading this morning, we pick up on the story of Joseph who endured bullying, violence, slavery, false accusation - all because of the jealousy of his older brothers. And when, finally, the tables turn and they come face to face, instead of exacting vengeance, Joseph chooses to forgive his brothers, saying 'God meant this for good'. Now, I can't believe that God orchestrated the terrible events of Joseph's life. God was not, I believe, behind the jealousy of the brothers. Always, however, I believe God was asking Joseph to respond in ways that could lead to good and better

outcomes. And, in this particular case, Joseph's response led to a whole family, a whole nation, in fact, being saved from starvation.

I think lots of us who were raised with Christianity have had similar moments, like Kate Bowler, of unpicking what we inherited or, like Elias, of falling out with God. One of the privileges of doing what I do is that sometimes people trust me enough to tell me their doubts, or why they fell out with God, or why they abandoned religion. Often I find that that doubt or hurt or anger has its roots in misunderstandings we absorb or inherit, often from childhood, about who God is and how God operates. And, so, often my first question is, 'Tell me about the God you gave up on, or don't believe in'. And, often, what I find is that that isn't the God I believe in either.



Genesis 50

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. ¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.