

Meditation for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Evensong¹
Sunday, March 11th, 2018
Elizabeth King

And he released unto them him that for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired; but he delivered Jesus to their will.

This week in our Old Testament reading we approach the conclusion of the story of Joseph and his brothers. In her meditation last week, Elisabeth drew our attention to the points in the story where one brother stands in for another, and this element of the story has really stuck with me as I have wrestled with the lessons for this evening. Sometimes the substitution of one brother for another happens voluntarily, while at other times it is enforced by the circumstances. So, at the conclusion of their second trip, Joseph holds Simeon prisoner in Egypt on behalf of the brothers as a guarantee until Benjamin can be brought to Egypt. Returning home without Simeon and with the message to deliver Benjamin, Reuben offers his father the lives of his sons as a guarantee for the protection of Benjamin. Judah again offers to bear the blame before his father should harm come to Benjamin. He makes good on this promise in his conversation with Joseph, begging him to enslave him rather than Benjamin for the apparent theft of the silver cup. Following Joseph's disappearance, Benjamin himself, the other son of Rachel, has become the beloved son of his father's old age. Even at the very beginning of the story, the blood of a goat stands in for Joseph's blood on the coat of many colours. The number of times throughout the story where someone or something takes on the burden, pain or punishment meant for another, even to the point of death, is remarkable. The substitutions build and build and, as they do, so they seem to work on the brothers' memories, and to address in some fashion the wrongs of the past. Finally, in offering to sacrifice himself for Benjamin, Judah refuses the temptation of betrayal to which he succumbed in regard to Joseph all those years ago. It is this act of Judah's that finally allows Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers and for their reconciliation to occur.

It is worth noting that the story of these brothers is not quite over here. After Israel's death the brothers of Joseph will begin to fear his vengeance, and it will lead them to try to lie to him about his father's last words on the subject. Joseph's answer then will be a stronger version of his answer now: "ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring it to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones."

In our second lesson we have another substitution: perhaps the chief one on which all others depend. Jesus stands in for Barabbas, the murderer, and in so doing stands in for each of us.

I struggle to say more than this at the moment about the Gospel reading. We will have more opportunity to consider it over the next three weeks, and we will probably need every

¹ Evensong Lections (Year 2): Genesis 45: 16-46:7; Luke 23: 1-25; Psalms 75 and 76. Eucharistic Lections: Galatians 4:21-5:1; John 6: 1-14; Psalms 122 (Introit) and 125 (Gradual)

repetition. In the light of Mothering Sunday's call to contemplate the Celestial City, the heavenly Jerusalem, however, I wonder whether we can at least say that this evening's lessons are calling us to mark one feature of that City's contours, one of her central ordering laws. The first human city was established by Cain, an outcome of his refusal to recognise himself as his brother's keeper. The Celestial City, on the other hand, which is in some sense Christ himself, reverses this order. The law of this city, as set down and lived out by the chief Cornerstone Himself, is the bearing of another's burdens, the willing of the other's good, the keeping of our brother and sister, the laying down of one's life for one's friend, even for one's enemy. Perhaps the story of Joseph and his brothers, with its layering of substitution after substitution, voluntary and involuntary, gives us a glimpse, or at least invites us to consider, how the order of this City is already at work in and through and beyond our lives. We don't always know the burdens, small and large, everyday and more occasional, intercessory and physical, others both living and dead, are carrying on our behalf. We may not even know the burdens we are in fact already carrying for others. The Gospel for today tells us though that of all these fragments of goodwill, of known, half-known and unknown substitutions, however, nothing will be lost. All will be gathered into the Jerusalem that "is built as a city that is at unity in itself..." May we abandon ourselves to the order of this city.