

Genesis 37: 1-4 and 12-28  
Romans 10: 5-15  
Matthew 14: 22-33

We have been hearing a lot about North Korea this week, haven't we?

Bellicose statements from both North Korea and from President Trump.

And it has caused anxiety about the possibility of conflict.

Of course, I don't know whether there will be military conflict or not.

I pray not.

But what I would say is we have been here before – back in 1994, which I am aware of on account of a job I was doing at the time.

Anyway, we should pray that a peaceful way through can be found.

One of the things I have noticed on account of having spent a big chunk of my life studying another Communist country, namely Vietnam...

...and getting to know that country really quite well...

What I have noticed is that I am very sensitive to the way in which the West depicts so-called authoritarian regimes or one-party states.

We've seen it with Iraq and Libya, and with Burma before that.

And now we see it with Iran and Syria and North Korea

And to use language one probably doesn't hear that often from the pulpit, what one hears about countries like these is often a load of tosh!

It is profoundly misleading and distorting.

Have you noticed the tendency to ridicule such countries, or to make out their leaders are mad, or failing that simply bad?

Witness the ridiculous things which are said about the North Korean lead Kim Jong-Un – often a lot of focus on his hair cut.

We are told apparently that he has a phobia about barbers and hence cuts his hair himself – that kind of thing.

Now, this is not Canon Martin being an apologist for North Korea. I have no wish to be that nor for any government. I am certain that bad things happen there.

But the point is it is complex and we do not understand North Korea at all well.

I can tell you for a fact that not everyone walks around Pyongyang with long faces and in fear.

Yes, there is laughter and love and all the normal stuff of aspirations and dreams – just like ourselves.

But we don't hear much about that.

So why am I am saying this?

What we are witnessing here – with reference to North Korea and countries similarly labelled – is a process of 'othering'.

Whereby a people or a nation are depicted as faintly sub-human, deviant and dangerous.

And while it may be the way in which international politics operates, it is contrary to God's way.

But it doesn't stop here.

This 'othering' we see in respect of North Korea is no different from the 'othering' which takes place in our own society, in our own communities, in our work places and even in our extended families

And churches are not immune either.

Keeping people at bay.

The homeless person we see on the streets who we fear, who we say 'is probably on drugs and dangerous'.

The Muslim person who wears a hijab or dresses differently from us.

The person whose sexuality is different from our own

The colleague at work who becomes the but of jokes

Or the person who simply irritates us probably in quite a minor way but somehow gets vilified out of all proportion.

We all do it – and that includes me – and yet it is a sin.

So why do we do it?

There is, it would appear, something very deep in the human psyche going on here.

But it comes from a place for fear, which again is not of God.

We build ourselves up by denigrating others.

It is us and them.

We make ourselves feel secure, often in a group, by enforcing boundaries which push others away.

'We' are not like 'them', we say.

And yet it is a conceit. A distraction from our own failings.

And, as I have suggested, we see it play out in international politics as much as it does in the life of this city, in our work places and in our communities.

Our reading from Genesis today captures something of this process of 'othering' in relation to Joseph's family.

Joseph, who is thrown into a pit and sold to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, is 'othered' by his brothers.

They hate him. They cannot speak peaceably to him. They are jealous of him, we hear in the passage.

But what is interesting, based on a close reading of the text, is that it is not really the stylised portrayal of Joseph we find in Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical.

Rather in the biblical text, the characters in the story are much more closely drawn.

Yes, the brothers are heartless and callous.

Having thrown their brother into the pit, they settle down to enjoy a meal.

But equally consider Joseph. He is pretty hard to bear too.

He tells unflattering stories about others to his father.

He rather appears to be swanning about while his brothers are out tending the flock.

And worst of all he tells of his dreams which tactlessly involve his family members bowing down before him.

That really irritates them.

Does Joseph deserve what he gets?

Of course not.

But equally it is not a case of 'all good' and 'all bad'.

For the writer of Genesis, it is not as simple as 'us' and 'them'.

Rather, what we have is a complex mixture of frail, fallen people who are nevertheless capable of greatness.

So, for us, in our own lives, we need to be wary of such black and white characterisation – wherever we encounter it.

Anything else is less than God.

A failure to see our fellow human beings – whether they are brothers and sisters in North Korea or people on the streets of Bristol – as made in the image of God, precious and cherished in his sight.

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans is at first sight rather cryptic and inaccessible.

But one of the things Paul is wrestling with is what it is to be God's people.

The context is this...

Paul, once upon time a devout Jew, has come to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We know that story.

Gentiles are now joining their number but many Jews are not.

Paul is wrestling with this.

How come?

Does it imply that God's purposes are not in fact working themselves out?

Paul reasons no.

The position of the Jews is only temporary, he says, and in fact serves God's purposes.

Indeed, it is precisely because of their rejection of Jesus that the 'good news' is being told.

But more than this, as Paul tries to work out what it is to be God's people, his key message is that God is God for all.

'There is no distinction,' he says, 'between Jew and Greek'.

'The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him' (verse 12).

And elsewhere:

'For Christ is the end of the law that everyone who has faith may be justified' (verse 3-4)

Everyone!

Thus, any distinctions we lay down between us and our neighbour...

Between us and people in North Korea.

Between the person begging on the street

The Muslim woman who wears a hijab

The person whose sexuality is different from ourselves

The colleague who is a bit different at work

These are our distinctions.

They are not God's.

But what does this mean practically for us?

What it means is this.

We need to be alert to the process of 'othering' that goes on in society – in international politics but also in our own lives.

And we need to watch ourselves.

We are vulnerable to engaging in such behaviour.

Remember, for God, there is no distinction.

The same Lord is Lord of all.

And secondly, we need to go out of our way to transcend these divisions – to break down notions of 'us' and 'them'.

To spend time with people who appear to be different from us.

This is so important.

It makes all the difference.

Because it doesn't take long for us to realise that all the silly divisions we make do not stand up to scrutiny, or at the very least do not define 'the other'.

They laugh and love just like us.

They have good days and bad days just like us.

They have aspirations and dreams just like us.

And God shines on them just like us.

Jesus came that no one might be lost, that all might be saved, and have eternal life.

It is our job as Christians to model this, to welcome the outcast, the 'other', and to speak out against the divisions in society

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!

Amen