

### John Harris

Our reading today from Genesis 45 must be one of the happiest “feel good, group hug” stories in the Good Book. The great family reunion. But indulge me if you will and go back to Chapter 37 when Jacob was told that Joseph would not be coming home.

*Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him.*

The Bible doesn't tell on how Joseph felt, but I'm guessing that he wasn't particularly happy either!

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Some of you may be aware that my wife and I recently spent a while exploring “Darkest Africa” and that included the spice islands of Zanzibar. Today I want to share with you a very personal journey.

Zanzibar is famous (or rather infamous) for having hosted the last “open” slave market in the world with a throughput of about 15,000 slaves per year. For perspective, that is thrice the population of Eastbourne! Every year.

Of course, the slave market is long gone and where it once stood there is now a museum and a church.

The museum begins with first-hand accounts of just what it felt like for the slave, starting with their capture. What it felt like to be going about your daily business and suddenly your life changes – forever. What it felt like to be marched in chains across Africa.

Fifteen thousand times every year people felt like Joseph must have felt. Felt that empty horror knowing that they would never see their homes and families again – but not knowing what lay ahead. Fifteen thousand times people would have felt like Jacob. Suddenly a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, a parent, a brother, a sister gone – and will never be coming home.

We all know what slavery is. We know that it is a bad thing and we applaud its abolishment. Of course we do. We are civilised 21<sup>st</sup> century beings.

The trouble is that we probably do not what slavery is. I am not going to shock you with the gory details but imagine having your baby pulled from your breast and thrown away into the jungle to die – just because it was slowing the group down! Or the person chained to you beheaded because they stumbled once too often.

Reading the stories of the physical and emotional trauma was overwhelming. And we had not got to the market or the ships or their destinations yet.

This was the first time that I had REALLY looked at slavery. These were people. Real people. People with feelings just like you and me.

Standing there, I found my emotions so totally wrung out and I could not bring myself to read all of the personal accounts, so I fast forwarded to the next section on the traders themselves. Men and their families with all the trappings of wealth.

And here I caught myself feeling the oddest of emotions. Some of those traders looked Arabic. In fact, the whole thing was referred to as the Arab Slave Trade and records show they were operating it back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Probably even earlier. Ah yes. Arabs are not like you and me. They can be very cruel you know. Yes, they are the bad people. Not like us.

It didn't take long to shatter that illusion and to read that there were black, white and brown slave traders. In fact, even common sailors would often pay up front for a "slave and a tooth". This was for a slave yet to be caught and the tusk of an elephant yet to be shot. The captive would then be made to carry the tusk up to a thousand miles to the coast. If they survived the journey both would be sold, and the sailor would pocket the profit.

Slavers weren't just "bad" people. They came from all walks of life and they were people just like you and me. Chances are that if we shake our own family tree hard enough, the odd slavers would fall out.

My next stop was the Anglican Cathedral Church of Christ – sometimes called the upside-down church due to a small faux pas during construction where all twelve pillars (representing the twelve apostles) were accidentally installed upside down.

I had always learned about the work that William Wilberforce did to stop the slave trade, but I don't think that his name is even mentioned in this church. There are however many, many tributes to David Livingstone. You see, he was the man who physically traipsed across Africa actually stopping the slave trade.

The altar in the church is situated where the former whipping tree once stood and it has a white marble circle surrounded by red to symbolise the blood of the slaves.

I stood there at that altar and I tried to tune myself into what had happened there. I felt raw fear. I felt despair. I felt tears. But strangely, I felt no anger.

I stood there at the altar and I prayed for forgiveness for what my people had done so long ago. My prayers came from deep within my soul and were genuine and sincere - but do you know what I felt in return? Nothing! I might just as well have been praying to a stone altar. I confess that I was more than a little disappointed. Perhaps shocked.

And then on a whim, I vowed that I would do whatever was in my power to make sure that this never happened again. And with that, I felt an overwhelming peace

flowing over me. I am not sure what I have let myself in for, but that feeling was palpable.

By the way, according to the World Economic Forum there are 40 million people living as slaves today. Eight times the entire population of New Zealand!

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I have had quite a bit of time to think about this experience and draw a few parallels.

Firstly, I regularly pray for forgiveness for my sins. We all do. It is part of every church service. But do we really know what sin is?

Rather like slavery, we don't usually delve too deep. But sin isn't just violations of the Ten Commandments. Sin isn't just the big things. And sin isn't the sole preserve of "bad" people.

The truth is that sin, as defined in the original translations of the Bible, means "to miss the mark." The mark, in this case, is the standard of perfection established by God and evidenced by Jesus. Viewed in that light, it is clear that we are all sinners.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

Once upon a long time ago, my uncle got a lift from the Parish Priest. While they were chatting, the Priest mentioned that he was on his way to hear confession at the nunnery and let slip that "It is like being stoned to death with popcorn". At the time, I thought that was rather funny, but now I realise that even they had sins to confess!

Secondly, it is good to remind ourselves that although William Wilberforce paved the way, it was Dr Livingstone who did the REAL work in Africa. So too, we should never be distracted by those who point the way. Our real hero is Jesus and Him alone.

John the Baptist said in John 1:29 "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*"

Thirdly, Jesus Himself told us in Matthew 11:28 "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*"

Some while ago, Reg preached an excellent sermon on the definition of Jesus' "yoke". I am going to take the more traditional implication that forgiveness carries responsibilities. We cannot just say "sorry" and carry on as before.

Forgiveness is not just a box to tick each Sunday. It means making a concerted effort to NOT do whatever it was again. I only received forgiveness when I vowed to DO something.

We can never be perfect – only God can be that - but we must become better people. A people worthy of wearing Christ's yoke.

Amen