Journeys of endangered travellers

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Pentecost + 11A – Matt 14:22-36 Peter walks on water to Jesus, Gen 37: 1-4, 12-28 Joseph sold to slavery in Egypt

Today we've seen two people embark on very uncertain journeys. Joseph gets taken to Egypt by some Midianite traders to be sold as a slave. And Peter, gets out of his boat during rough weather to walk across the water towards Jesus, and he starts to sink. Very uncertain journeys. Of course, our fears are allayed by today's Psalm which tells us things will eventually go really well for Joseph in Egypt. And Jesus wastes no time in rescuing Peter from sinking. But for the moment, let's stay with Joseph and Peter in that fearful in-between time. Because that's where most of us live our lives – on an as-yet uncertain journey towards whatever lies in store for us.

Let's look again for a moment at the prayer of the day. *Mighty God and ruler of all creation, give new strength to our faith, that we may recognise your presence even when all hope seems lost. Help us to face all trials with serenity as we walk with Christ through the stormy seas of life and come at the last to your eternal peace*.

It's a prayer inspired by today's readings about Joseph and Peter. We saw each of them today as they set off on hopeless looking journeys through the stormy seas of life; Peter quite literally. Today's prayer asks that *our* life's journeys might take us to places of strong faith – take us to a consciousness of God's presence – take us to where we might face our trials with serenity – take us to a place of peace. But how? How is this possible? Is there a tried and trusty way?

Actually, yes. Let me tell you a story of one person who

suddenly and unexpectedly lost her job. It was very hard; it was spiritually crushing. Did anyone want her; would anyone? Who was she without a job? She just had to go, but with no idea where. It was totally new for her to be out of control like this. She had nowhere to go.

Someone invited her to try an ancient form of prayer – to walk a labyrinth. It was a way of praying she hadn't tried before. But she decided to try it.

There's a difference between a labyrinth and a maze. As you see in the service booklet, the labyrinth (on the left) has no dead ends, but the maze (on the right) has them. So a maze is a puzzle set up with false paths to trick us. But a labyrinth has a path which we can trust. Walking a labyrinth is a journey of prayer – a metaphor for walking our winding journey of life towards the future that God can see for us – the centre isn't always in view, but it's always there.

So my friend stood at the entrance to the labyrinth. She was about to look it over and get an idea of its layout; that's what she'd normally have done with any journey – plan ahead. But something told her not to do it this time. So she simply set off, looking only at the path right at her feet. She took a first step, then another, and slowly went on.

Simply putting one foot in front of the other, she had trouble keeping her balance. She was stressed. But gradually, she learnt to trust that the *path* would come to meet *her*. She let go of the worry; she stopped trying to be in control.

By the time she'd reached the centre – and she still has no idea how long it took – she'd received a gift from the labyrinth. It was this; she knew by then that *whatever her direction, whatever her feelings, the path would come to meet her.* And more; *regardless of the number of turnings or the amount of time she took, that path would lead her unerringly*

to the centre.

What a lesson about prayer! – that prayer is not about duty and planning, not determined by remorse or worry for the past. Rather, it's discovering God reaching out to us; calling to us – to help us leave those burdens behind, outside the labyrinth, as one step at a time, we wend our way to the centre.

My friend's journey back out of the labyrinth was a very different experience from the inward journey. She'd entered the labyrinth carrying a heavy load of pain and worry. But by the time she'd reached the centre, she'd learned to hand it to God, and in return, she'd received a special gift for the outward journey. The gift was her new understanding that the path would always come to meet her, and regardless of all the changes in direction, it would lead her to the centre.

Today's readings speak of journeys like this one; journeys of endangered travellers whose next step on life's path will come to meet them. God's hand is stretched out to steady us. Joseph set out to find his brothers not knowing that it was the start of a journey which would take him bound as a slave to Egypt. But ultimately, his journey would see him rescue his family from famine. And years later, his descendants will walk a labyrinth too; a labyrinth that we call the Exodus, which will last for forty years.

Then there's Peter. He steps out of his boat to walk on the water towards Jesus. A few faltering steps and he's overcome by fear. He begins to sink and cries out to be saved. Jesus – the Way – comes and takes hold of him. This is Peter's whole life-story glimpsed in a moment of crisis.

Throughout this week, let's pray the prayer of the day. Will *our* life's journeys also take us to places of strong faith – take us to a consciousness of God's presence – take us to where we might face our trials with serenity – take us to

places of peace? Let’s wonder – could the frightening *how* questions to be answered by a wordless prayer as uncluttered as walking a labyrinth, and seeing what comes to meet us; or who? Amen