

The Swiss Church in London, Sermon, 19 May 2019
Tamar, the young widow (Genesis 38)

Joseph and his brothers – the tribes of Israel

One of my fondest memories of religious education classes in primary school is eating lentils. I loved lentils as a child, and I even wanted lentils for my birthday which is an odd choice for a child. So when our RE teacher brought lentils to class to make nomadic life in the Bible more tangible for us children, it was paradise for me as all my classmates despised the dish- I could eat all the lentils!

The other thing I fondly remember are the stories of Joseph and his eleven brothers, the sons of Jacob, later also called Israel, and the great-grandson of Abraham and Sara. Perhaps you remember the famous story of Joseph who was sold by his older jealous brothers to the Ismaelites and then to the Pharaoh. One of these brothers was Judah. Today we are going to hear the story of Tamar and Judah, who were daughter-in-law and father-in-law. The tribe of Judah was to become the most powerful among the twelve tribes and Tamar played an active role in this success story. She knew of Judah's shining future long before anyone else knew, and she was determined to be part of it, against all the odds.

Tamar, the young childless widow

This is the story of Tamar and Judah and his sons according to Genesis 38.

Judah left his brothers to move to Hirah where he met his wife. The Bible tells us that they had at least three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. Quite possibly they had daughters too, but often the daughters are not mentioned in the Bible. Judah found a wife for his firstborn Er. Her name was Tamar. But Er died soon

after their marriage and Tamar became a widow at a young age without children. This was a difficult fate for a woman at the time. As a woman it was her obligation to produce male heirs to guarantee the succession of her husband's line – not dissimilar to a princess in the British monarchy! Through marriage, a woman became the possession of her in-law family, and if no heirs were born this was a problem for both the woman as well as the in-law family who had now to take care of the woman who hadn't even produced heirs. Thus were the rules at the time. But there was a solution to this problem.

Levirate marriage

In Old Testament times there was a law, called the Levirate marriage, by which the brother of a deceased man is obligated to marry his brother's widow, and the widow is obligated to marry her deceased husband's brother. 'Levirate' from the Latin word *levir* means 'husband's brother'. Levirate marriages are practiced in societies with strong clan structures. The idea behind this law is that the brother of the deceased would produce heirs with the widow in his brother's stead. For the widow it was also some sort of social security. However, she did not have a choice, and neither did her brother-in-law.

According to the law Judah gave Tamar his second son Onan as her new husband. Onan however refused to produce children in his brother's stead, and as a consequence he died too, according to the Bible struck down by God who was not pleased by Onan's behaviour. Left was Judah's youngest son, Shelah, who was now to become Tamar's husband, but Shelah was too young, and so Judah sent Tamar back to live with her father until Shelah would be old enough for marriage.

Tamar went back, widowed twice, with no children, and with the additional disgrace of having been sent back to her father's house. She lived like an outlaw in her father's village, the neighbours whispering behind her back, mocking her, avoiding her. Years passed, Tamar waited, but nothing happened. Judah, worried that his youngest son would die too, thought that this whole unfortunate affair would be forgotten one day and that no one would notice that he had broken the Levirate law.

But Tamar did not forget. After all it was not only her duty to marry her youngest brother-in-law, it was also her right. Tamar had a prevision that Judah would become the most powerful tribe in the region, and her place was in Judah's tribe.

The prostitute by the wayside

After the death of his wife, Judah went to the sheepshearers in a village near where Tamar lived. Tamar heard about his arrival. She took off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up in nice clothes, and sat next to the entrance of a town on Judah's way. Judah was not alone, his youngest son, Tamar's fiancé, was with him too and Tamar saw that he had grown up and should have been given to her in marriage a while ago.

When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute as she was dressed up in that fashion. He didn't recognise her and he decided to buy her body for money. Yet he didn't have any money. "What will you give me?", Tamar asked. "I will send you a young goat when I'm back home", Judah said. She said: "Only if you give me your ring, your cord and your staff as a pledge until you send it." So he gave them to her and used her body, and she let it happen. After that Tamar went away, put away her nice clothes and back on the garments of

widowhood. Later Judah sent back a young man from the village to recover his pledge, but he could not find the prostitute. "Where is the prostitute who was at the wayside?", the young man asked. "There are no prostitutes here", the people from the town said. Judah returned home without his ring, his cord and his staff. He thought nothing of it.

Tamar is pregnant

A few months later, a scandal broke. Tamar was pregnant! For an unmarried woman this was a crime, and the punishment for it was death. As Tamar's father-in-law Judah was to decide on her punishment and he said: "Bring her out and let her be burnt." But Tamar sent for him, showed him his ring, his cord and his staff and said: "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." Judah acknowledged that they were his and said to the people in his village: "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." This is how Tamar won back her place in Judah's tribe.

Prostitution – a free choice?

Tamar sells her body to fight for her right and gain her place in the history of Israel.

How do we judge her decision?

We can say that Tamar uses her female seductive power to manipulate Judah, like Eve seduced Adam to eat from the tree of life. It is easy to fall into the trap of this judgement. The myth of the seductive woman using her sexual powers over men is deeply engrained in us. It is the reason why women have to hide their bodies in certain parts of the world and aren't even allowed to leave the house on their own. It is the reason why women were burnt on the stake until not that long ago. The myth of the seductive woman and the driven man has

far-reaching consequences for both women and men and does not do justice to who we are. We are human beings first and foremost each of us with a unique personality and many different gifts, made in the image of God.

It was Tamar's last and only choice to sell her body, her only chance to find a way out of her life as an outcast. If women are left with only that one choice to give up the power over their body in order to survive, then something is profoundly wrong with the system. No woman chooses to prostitute herself, except for a very few whose voices are often used to justify prostitution. If we look at the bigger picture women who prostitute themselves are either forced to sell their body or left with no other choice to survive or feed their families, and the fact that prostitution is a woman's last resort to survive has a lot to do with the power structures in our societies.

Prostitution is not about sex, it is about power, and the story of Tamar is a good example for this. Tamar is both, victim of her circumstances and at the same time a strong character taking her fate in her own hands. Her only chance to gain back power is by giving up control over her body, and this is the fate of many women worldwide still today.

If we could see each other not so much as women and men, but as human beings each of us with unique talents and as children of God, then our choices, and especially the choices of women, would be different. If we could see each other as human beings, then women would not need to hide their bodies and they could walk freely everywhere in the world, making their contribution where their talents are most needed. If we could see each other as children of God, equal and free, we would all be free to be the best version of ourselves. It starts with us here today. Justice begins with the way we look at each other. Do we see in the other person who we want to see, or do we take the time to

find out who that person really is? If we see God's image in the other person rather than making them an object of our own desires, then how could we take power over them and exploit them?

Jesus came to fulfil the Law, not by blindly following it, but by testing it against the core principals of the Kingdom of God. In Christ, he says, there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women. The Law is no longer in charge of us, it is through our faith that we are God's children. Jesus does not dismiss the Law all together, after all we need a common rulebook to live together peacefully, but the Law has its limitations, and ultimately we are called to seek God's justice for everyone so that we can all live a life in dignity.

Amen