

Genesis 37:1-28: Dreamcoat

Holy Communion, Trinity 10, 13th August 2023

I am not going to be looking at today's gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus walking on the water (I preached on this same passage 3 years ago), but, starting with our Old Testament reading, the story of Joseph. This spans many chapters, 37-50. Genesis 45 is the set reading for next Sunday (so I am hoping Claire was not planning to speak about it).

For the last quite a few months I have been reading through the Old Testament. I have started at Genesis and am reading straight through. (I am Nehemiah at the moment.) The difficulty with this is that you soon run into Numbers, Leviticus and Chronicles, and a chronic load of lists, which are somewhat hard to digest. My brother-in-law is using a bible-in-a-year app that goes chronologically through the Old Testament, which is a bit better.

In looking at Joseph, I want to think too about how we use the Old Testament.

You probably know the story of Joseph best, not from the Bible, but from Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor¹ Dreamcoat, by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. This was initially commissioned for a school choir and performed in 1968. Our daughter was in a performance of it at school.

Joseph's father was Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, son of Isaac, the early fathers of the Israeli nation. Indeed, Israel was the name given by God to Jacob (32:28). Joseph was one of Jacob's 12 sons, and one of two from his favourite wife, Rachel (the other being Benjamin). He was born around 1600 BC, though the story was probably not written down in this form till the 7th century BC.

Jacob unashamedly had a favourite son, which was Joseph, and this seems to have contributed to Joseph being a pretty annoying teenager. Jacob gives Joseph a special coat, a garment with long sleeves; the idea that it had stripes of different colours came from later commentators. Joseph has two dreams in which his brother's eleven sheaves of wheat all bow down to his, and the sun, moon and eleven stars all bow down to him. He tactlessly tells his family about his dreams.

His brothers consequently 'hated him', and 'could not speak peaceably to him'. So, when they see him coming to check up on them when they are out looking after the family flocks, they plan to kill him. (Even though we may find family annoying sometimes, this is somewhat excessive.) The elder brother, Reuben, persuades them not to do this, and they end up selling him into slavery in Egypt. (Still not quite the behaviour one would expect.)

In Egypt, Joseph is sold to Potiphar, the captain of the Pharaoh's guard. Joseph rose to become the overseer of the household, because Potiphar "saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper". However, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, and, when he refuses, she tells Potiphar that Joseph tried to assault her. Joseph is put in prison. (There is a Jewish tradition that Potiphar knew Joseph was innocent, and, though he could not ignore his wife's accusations, he did not deal with Joseph too harshly.)

In prison, Joseph again rises to the top, being given responsibility by the gaoler for the care of all the other prisoners. "The Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper".

¹ Yes, I know the spelling is wrong.

Two of the prisoners, one being Pharaoh's cup-bearer, the other his baker, have dreams. Joseph interprets them, saying the cupbearer will be restored to his position, but the baker will be executed. Both events happen. The cupbearer proceeds to forget about Joseph, until, two years later, Pharaoh has dreams that no-one can interpret. In one, seven fat cows come out of the Nile, followed by seven thin cows. The thin cows eat the fat cows. In the second, there are seven plump grains of corn, and then seven thin, blighted ears grow up and eat the first seven.

The cupbearer then tells Pharaoh about Joseph, who is brought before him and interprets the dreams. There will be seven years of bumper crops, followed by seven years of famine. The fact that there are two different dreams with the same meaning shows that the events will definitely occur, and soon (41:32 – and note that Joseph had two dreams with the same meaning when he was a boy). Pharaoh appoints Joseph to be effectively Prime Minister of Egypt to oversee plans for dealing with famine. Joseph is 30 years old now, so it is 13 years since his brothers set upon him.

Joseph saves up grain during the years of plenty, so that there was plenty of food available during the years of famine. The famine had extended to Canaan, so that his brothers, not knowing even that he was alive, yet alone his exalted position, went to Egypt to buy grain. They come before Joseph bow before him (like the sheaves of wheat and the stars), but do not recognise him. (Unlike all good Jews, he would almost certainly not have had a beard.) Joseph is sharp with them, accusing them of being spies, and demanding that they fetch their youngest brother, Benjamin, to prove that what they say about themselves is true, and keeps Simeon as a guarantee that they return. They go back to Jacob in Canaan, and return with Benjamin.

Again, Joseph tests them. As they leave with grain, he hides his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. They set off, but Joseph sends his steward after them to search them to recover the cup. He tells them that Benjamin will have to remain as his slave. But Judah offers to stand in place of Benjamin.

As the Technicolor Dreamcoat has it, "and Joseph knew by this his brothers now were honest men." He reveals himself to them, there is a tearful reunion, and Joseph moves the whole family to Egypt (66 descendants of Jacob in total).

That was a potted history. There is a lot more detail in Genesis. It must be one of the most expanded stories in the Bible, covering twelve chapters. Worth a read sometime.

For Jews, this is part of God's plan to protect and preserve the Jewish nation. Without Joseph being in this position of power, Jacob and his family could have perished in the famine, and Israel might never have got going. The settlement of the family in Egypt then led to the Exodus, the foundational story of Israel. Joseph is seen in Jewish commentaries as a *tzadik*, a righteous person.

In the Christian tradition, Joseph is seen as an example of faith (Hebrews 11:22). The orthodox churches celebrate him as "Joseph the all-comely" for his spiritual depths, and have two feasts for him. He is seen by some as foreshadowing Christ, bringing salvation to his people, and bringing forgiveness and unity to his family.

Joseph has some positive characteristics:

- He was obviously an accomplished administrator.
- Though Pharaoh arranges his marriage to an Egyptian priest's daughter, he remains faithful to God.
- He always acknowledges God as source of interpretation of dreams.
- He calls his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, by Hebrew names with significant Jewish meanings.
- He refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife.
- More generally, he does not despair despite what happens to him, but maintains his trust in God.

- Though he gives his brothers a run-around, he does forgive them (he might well not have done) and subsequently cares for them. “And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

There are some negatives too:

- He makes no attempt to contact his father or family from Egypt.
- He is pretty insensitive in sharing the interpretation of dreams, both his own about his brothers, and Pharaoh’s baker’s dream about his fate.
- The silver cup he puts in Benjamin’s sack is the cup he uses for divination (44:5). Divination is later forbidden in the Bible (e.g. Deuteronomy 18:10). As a senior official in Egypt, it would have been difficult to avoid religious rituals, and there is no comment about this in the passage.
- His treatment of Egyptian people is quite harsh. In the years of plenty, he collects grain, presumably as a levy on the people. But in the years of famine, he sells it back to them. When the people run out of money, he takes their livestock as payment. When they have nothing else left to give, he takes their land off them, and enslaves the entire population. He keeps them alive, but this is not the welfare state. Again, he may not have had complete freedom in what he did here, but this is not an example of just or generous dealing.

What do we do with this passage, or indeed a lot of the Old Testament stories?

1. Just because a story appears in the Old Testament does not mean it is an example we should follow. Sometimes the Bible gives a judgement on behaviour: the book of Kings and Chronicles go through each king in turn labelling them either good or bad, dependent mainly on whether they worship the Lord or follow or tolerate idol worship. But elsewhere the reader has to make their own decision about the behaviour.
2. The understanding of God develops through the Old Testament. Joseph was before God gave any laws to Israel, before Moses, before the Ten Commandments. People often talk about God revealing himself over time. Initially, following God was seen as mainly obeying his commandments, the laws and rules. But over time it comes to be seen as more associated with the heart, with love, mercy, righteousness and justice.
3. Jesus takes this even further. So, animal sacrifice is replaced by Jesus’ sacrifice. Righteousness comes from Christ, with the Spirit given to aid believers in their obedience to God.

Old Testament stories can be colourful and engaging, which is why we often use them with children. But they are not always easy, and some of them are quite disturbing. This is probably why we do not often use them for teaching.

We can take from Joseph his persistent trust in God, his forgiveness of his brothers, and the way God’s plan for his people was worked out in a very unlikely way.

Jeremy Thake
St. John & St. Stephen.

Genesis 37

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 2 This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, 'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. 7 There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' 8 His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

9 He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' 10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?' 11 So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers

12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' 14 So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, 15 and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' 16 'I am seeking my brothers,' he said; 'tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.' 17 The man said, 'They have gone away, for I heard them say, "Let us go to Dothan."' So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' 22 Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him'—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers agreed. 28 When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.