

Dalziel St. Andrew's Parish Church : Motherwell
Sunday 12th February 2012 Genesis 37: 1-36

The story of Joseph is a remarkable one. Did you know that more chapters in the Book of Genesis are devoted to him than to any of the other patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Also, although each of the others was blessed in a material sense, no one surpassed the success of Jacob's most favoured son. At the end of the story, we find Joseph appointed as second in charge of all Egypt; now, that was a great big deal at the time, for Egypt was an extremely powerful nation and Pharaoh was not easily impressed.

Yet, Joseph's rise to prominence might be considered as meteoric and out of the blue. He interprets some dreams for *the big cheese* in Egypt and goes from zero to hero. This was literally his get out of jail free card, and he must have been glad of it. No doubt, to many who were jostling for position in this ancient superpower, it may have appeared as if Joseph came from left field and was an instant hit. But, a bit like some of those who apparently make it big in the world of music or film and become an "*overnight success*," Joseph had a back-story to consider. God had been preparing him from very early on in his life for the leadership role (in Egypt, and for His chosen people of Israel) he was to assume.

Admittedly, in his teenage years, his brothers viewed Joseph as a primadonna. His dreams, the substance of which he foolishly shared, set Joseph apart from the crowd. He also told tales on his siblings – never a great idea! But, there was something over which he had no control, and that was the bias shown to him by his father – you know, that coat of many colours, which appears in the annoyingly catchy song written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Just as Isaac and Rebekah had played the game of favourites with their twin boys – Esau and Jacob – so, Jacob repeated the pattern, causing tangible tension amongst the twelve. However, Jacob's favouritism and Joseph's boasting did not justify the actions that followed. Joseph was seized and beaten. He was sold into slavery. Then, they lied about him to their father, even tampering with evidence at the crime scene. It's a plot worthy of an episode on C.S.I., and would have taken Hercule Poirot to work through the ins and outs of the staged murder. Now, you might guess at this point (if you did not already know how things pan out) that matters could not get worse – you would be wrong! Potiphar, Captain of Pharaoh's Guard, bought Joseph as a house slave. Initially, all was well and Joseph was in the good books again. But, Potiphar's wife had other ideas. Not only was our hero clever, he also had the looks of a leading man. She noticed this and tried to entice him into an illicit affair. All credit to Joseph, he stood his ground and recognised that it would be wrong on every level to give in to temptation. Not only would it have been a betrayal of his master, but, in his own words, "*How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?*" (39:9)

How very different this is to Abram passing off his wife as his sister! You see, there is depth to Joseph, which is shown in his attitude and his actions. He did the right thing, even although it got him into deep trouble. Thrown into prison, curiously, Joseph even prospered there and won the admiration of his jailer and cellmates. This was truly a man with whom God walked! But, listen; there is no getting away from the fact that he was still in jail. And remember, he wasn't to know how the story ends. Faced with questions from two of his buddies who shared porridge with him, Joseph again chose not to compromise. One got good news (the cupbearer) and the other bad (the baker) when Joseph offered an interpretation of their dreams. Again, a lesser, more self-serving, individual, may have been tempted to sugar the pill – not Joseph, he told it precisely as God instructed him to do so.

Now, you may have thought that such obedience to divine instructions would have brought instant relief and release from prison – you would be wrong. "*The chief cupbearer...did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.*" (40:23) Now, there's a statement ripe with the temptation for Joseph to become bitter. He had been faithful to God and helpful to those who asked for his assistance, yet, it took a further two years of languishing in prison before Pharaoh had a dream and Joseph's big

chance came. (41:1) And, even when that opportunity presented itself, Joseph demonstrated a servant mentality, rather than a self-serving one: *“I cannot do it’ (interpret the dream), Joseph replied to Pharaoh, ‘but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”* (41:16) That is a recurring theme – all the way through the story, Joseph shows a mentality of trust and utter dependence upon the LORD.

Joseph is gifted, he is handsome, he is physically strong, and he is likeable, but none of what Joseph achieves in his lifetime is down to any of those things, for they are all totally surpassed by his faith in God. Through the tough times of hatred and rejection by his brothers, being roughed up and sold to foreigners as a slave, pursued by the lustful wife of Potiphar, as well as wrongfully accused and condemned to imprisonment, Joseph’s faith in the promises and mysterious purposes of God did not falter. In fact, truth be told, every single one of those experiences made Joseph the man he was and prepared him for greater things.

And, of course, that higher calling was placed upon him by none other than Pharaoh as he conferred on Joseph the mantle of leadership in a great nation during times of plenty and of need – the dreams (and the reality) of seven fat cows/good heads of grain and seven lean, ugly cows/worthless and scorched heads of grain. God had now restored his coat of many colours, taken away from Joseph by the jealous actions of his brothers. If the story were to end there, we might think it appropriate – there is something almost karma-like about the reward Joseph receives at the hands of Pharaoh. But, as Christians, we do not believe in karma, but in the Judge of all the earth. It is the LORD Who promises faithfulness to those who are faithful to Him. And, even more than that, for this story has a wonderful conclusion, a surprising ending with a twist in the tale to rival any Hollywood movie.

During the years of barrenness and famine, Jacob’s sons (Joseph’s brothers) go down to Egypt to plead for food to sustain them. As is always the case in the Bible where God is involved, they get far more than they could have bargained for, and well above what they deserved. At first, Joseph does a bit of play-acting, but then reveals who he is. We ought not to be surprised at the reaction of his spiteful siblings: *“...his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.”* (45:3) Standing before them was the one they had despised and rejected, now an all-powerful ruler in Egypt. However, they need not have feared because love and forgiveness dominated the heart of Joseph, rather than the resentment and rage you might have expected: *“God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.”* (45: 7-8)

Like a piece of meat, which had been tenderized through many physical blows, Joseph’s heart was soft towards those who had been hard on him. What an amazing example of someone who was able to take the moral high ground without appearing patronising. And, what a fantastic example of the way God calls each of us to respond to those who make life difficult for us. Joseph has moved from being a teenager who showed off, to a mature man who understood and actively practiced divine qualities he learned from the God he served in Canaan and Egypt.

One final thing about the story of Joseph. I had not noticed before that he *“was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”* (41:46) This is, as you will appreciate, of massive symbolic significance. Joseph was a type of the One Whom God promised to send as Saviour and Lord of the whole world (not just of Egypt, or even of Israel) – Jesus of Nazareth. And, at what age do we believe Christ began His public ministry? You got it – 30! Can you see how marvelously the overarching themes of the Holy Scriptures overlap and reinforce one another, bringing us a message of God’s grace and plan of salvation?