

## Joseph

St Ursula's, Bern: 20 August, 2023

Today's reading from Genesis (45:1-15) is a key episode in the story of Joseph and his brothers. It's near the end of this story of family conflict and reconciliation that takes place in the two contrasting settings of simple, rural Canaan and the more sophisticated, imperial world of Egypt. It's a story about favouritism, anger, violence, danger, despair, and triumph, with threads of personal growth running through it. Today's reading is full of extraordinary emotional power, with grown men weeping buckets of tears; we also find here important insights into the pattern of God's action in the whole story told by the Bible, here still at an early stage.

It seemed a good idea to reflect not just on this one passage but on the whole Joseph story, which runs over many chapters, so we've planned a series of Bible studies starting this week to look at some of its key themes. Today I will introduce some of those themes, hoping this may prompt some of you to explore this well-known story, to read it slowly and thoughtfully on your own, and maybe to join us for the upcoming Bible studies when we can dig a bit deeper.

And yes, it is a well-known story, but not only in its Biblical form. I suspect that what many people know of Joseph comes from the 1960s musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. This includes some memorable songs and it does follow the Biblical plot quite closely, but it's interesting to compare the messages of the musical with those of Genesis. The take-home message of the *Joseph* musical is suggested by repeated lines such as "You are what you feel", "Any dream will do", and "Hang on now, Joseph, you'll make it some day". That's hardly surprising: this musical written in the 1960s expresses a kind of optimistic, vaguely spiritual creed that tells us: *You can be who you want to be. Be true to your inner sense of who you truly are, and through the power of the human spirit within you, you can overcome all obstacles and achieve your dream. We can be heroes, all of us heroes of our own stories, just like Joseph.*

How does that compare with the Biblical story of Joseph? Even if Joseph is its central figure, and even if in some respects he does eventually grow into a rather impressive figure, he isn't really the hero of the story. In fact, if we read the Bible looking for human heroes, we will misread it, because that's not really what it's about. The story of Joseph in Genesis is not about the triumph of the human spirit; this story does not encourage us to dream our beautiful dream, whatever that may be, and then achieve it; it does not urge us to be true to what we feel about ourselves and to become the hero of our life-story.

Indeed, if there is a dream that is being fulfilled in the story of Joseph, and indeed in the story of Genesis and the whole Bible, it is not any human dream, individual or collective, but rather God's dream, God's longing, God's plan. The story of Joseph, as one section of the longer Bible story, is about how God is present in the midst of

human stupidity, nastiness and violence, even among his own chosen people, and about how God is at work to redeem the disasters that we bring about and to reshape our lives to bring about the flourishing, the joy, the love in community that is God's dream for his people and for the whole world. That is God's dream, and God invites us to step into it, to dream it with him, to become collaborators in the fulfilment of God's dream.

The 1960s musical is by no means the only retelling of the Joseph story. To mention just two other versions, in the 1930s Thomas Mann wrote his huge novel, *Joseph and His Brothers*. And the Qur'an, the scripture of Islam, contains its own distinctive account of Joseph. I'd love to talk more about these, but there isn't time now.

Let's turn next to a brief recap of the Joseph story in Genesis. Jacob, also known as Israel, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, is the bearer of God's promise to bless Abraham's family, to make them a great nation, and to bless the whole world through them. Now an old man, living in the land of Canaan, Jacob has twelve sons. His favourite is Joseph, and he makes a special, colourful coat for him. Joseph tells his family about his dreams that suggest he will have a remarkable future. His jealous brothers can't stand Joseph the dreamer, their father's obnoxious favourite, so when a chance arises they nearly kill him, but instead sell him into slavery in Egypt.

In Egypt, Joseph's abilities impress his master, Potiphar, who puts him in charge of his whole property. Potiphar's wife repeatedly tries to seduce Joseph; his resistance so angers her that she accuses him of attempted rape. Joseph is thrown into prison, but here again his abilities are recognized and he is put in charge of all the other prisoners. Now another extraordinary ability of Joseph is revealed: he can interpret dreams, which he does for two fellow-prisoners, high-ranking servants of Egypt's ruler, Pharaoh. So when Pharaoh needs someone to interpret his dreams Joseph is brought from prison and gives the interpretation: Egypt will suffer terrible famine and must plan accordingly. Suitably impressed, Pharaoh appoints Joseph to run Egypt through the coming years of crisis, which he does, brilliantly.

Now we move back to Joseph's brothers in Canaan. When the famine comes they travel to Egypt where Joseph has piled up huge stores of grain. The brothers don't recognize that the powerful Egyptian official standing before them as they beg him to sell them grain is the brother they sold into slavery years before. But Joseph recognizes them. In a complex sequence of scenes Joseph accuses the brothers of spying and makes various demands of them. He seems to be probing, testing their honesty, seeing what kind of men they now are. They come out of the test well and eventually Joseph is overwhelmed with emotion: he can conceal himself no more and reveals himself to his brothers. He assures them of his forgiveness and sends them to bring Jacob to Egypt. The story, and the book of Genesis, end with Jacob

reunited with all his sons, the forefathers of Israel's twelve tribes. For now, Abraham's family is secure, but living in Egypt, outside the promised land.

So what themes can we draw out of the story of Joseph? Let's start with that of being faithful to the God of Israel in a strange land. For Joseph, Egypt is a strange land with its different gods and way of life, but Joseph at the same time gets deeply involved in Egypt while also being faithful to the God of his fathers, the God of Israel. Centuries later another generation of Israelite exiles would ask the question, by the rivers of Babylon, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137) That's what Joseph had to do: learn to sing the Lord's song in the strange land of Egypt. In one of our Bible studies we can reflect on the concern in many parts of the Bible with how to be faithful as a small minority among those who do not hold our faith: how to be faithful to God, and also how to flourish and be a blessing to the world around us. That is of course also a question for us to address today.

Secondly, a fascinating thing about the Joseph story is that in comparison with many parts of the Bible, God doesn't seem to do very much. God doesn't intervene dramatically. But although it mainly seems as if this story unfolds just like any other human drama, a deep faith runs through it that, in St Paul's words, "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). Right at the very end of this story Joseph says to his brothers: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." (Genesis 50:20) In other words, there is no situation, no problem, no darkness, no disaster, that can keep God out. God was present and active, silently, unseen, in Joseph's life, even when he experienced great injustice, terrible abuse, and God used all that Joseph went through to bring about great blessings. There's much for us to reflect on here: What does it mean to trust at all times in God's wise and loving providence?

Thirdly, as Christians, we ultimately read the Old Testament as pointing ahead to Jesus Christ and fulfilled in him. This is a sensitive matter that needs respectful handling in relations between Christians and Jews, who do not read the Hebrew scriptures in the same way. Nevertheless, it is a basic Christian conviction, present throughout the New Testament, that the Old Testament scriptures prefigure Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27, 44-45). So one question we also naturally ask as we read the story of Joseph is how it points ahead to the story of Jesus.

In the light of Christ we can discern in the story of Joseph a kind of preliminary, incomplete sketch of *reconciliation* brought about through *death and resurrection*. Joseph in fact goes through a kind of double death and resurrection. He is cruelly thrown by his brothers into a pit to die, but God raises him up to new life in Egypt. And then Joseph is unjustly thrown into prison, but again God raises him up to a

glorious new life. And the final outcome of this death-and-resurrection pattern of God's working through Joseph is reconciliation and life.

This is powerfully conveyed in today's passage describing Joseph's reconciliation with the brothers who had once plotted his death. The message of the New Testament is that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19) and that at the heart of this work of reconciliation is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Here in Genesis we could say that, on a smaller canvass, and in a more limited and imperfect way, God is present and active in Joseph, through his death and resurrection, reconciling his brothers to himself. When Joseph finally reveals himself to his astonished and fearful brothers, with their terrible past sin still on their consciences, it's like the risen Jesus coming to his astonished and fearful disciples, who are conscious of their failure, and telling them: "Don't be afraid: it's me. The night is over; the new day has dawned." So in today's reading Joseph says to his brothers: "'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured here in Egypt, and all that you have seen. . . . And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.'" (Genesis 45:4-5, 13, 14)

Joseph wept. Jesus wept. God is in these tears of reconciliation.

There's much to discuss here, not just about these rich interconnections in the scriptures, but also about reconciliation in the brokenness of our lives and of the world today: perhaps the joy of reconciliation achieved; or maybe its painful absence; our longing for reconciliation, hoping and praying for it; and reflection on the way to reconciliation, and the cost of it. I don't have answers or easy solutions. I struggle with these things. There is much to discuss.

I hope these comments have given some idea of all that there is to explore in the story of Joseph; and I hope some of you may be interested to join us for our Bible studies to dig into it a bit deeper.

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