21st July 2013

Genesis 45

The previous week I started to look at the story of Joseph, that well known story from the book of Genesis, made popular by the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical and that Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat. I talked then about how Joseph was a dreamer but how his dreams and his interpretation of them led to further animosity between him and his family which eventually led to his brothers faking his death and selling him into slavery in Egypt. I talked about dreams and visions and their value in helping us move forward to the future with hope and new possibilities. But I also spoke about dreams that seem dashed, or when dreams don’t come true.

The last sermon I preached on the day of the Wimbledon men’s single s final and although it was in people’s minds I didn’t want to raise expectations that Andy Murray would come through to win Britain’s first men’s singles title in 77 years. We had been there last year. However this year his dream came true. Andy Murray caused the nation (Scotland and the rest of us!) to rejoice. In a nail-biting final he finally edged past Djokovic. It was a personal triumph for him in many ways. He dreamt as a boy winning Wimbledon. He had set his sights on achieving this throughout his whole career and he showed the determination and perseverance needed to be a true champion.

But it was also a triumph for his home town of Dunblane. Since the gunning down of 17 schoolchildren in a gymnasium in the towns’ primary school in 1996, the name of the town has always been associated with tragedy. Now it is associated with Andy Murray, Wimbledon Champion. Murray’s triumph will not be able to erase all those dreadful memories but it offers some redemption for the town.

Andy Murray himself was at the school the day the killings took place. He was about 7 years old and on the way to the gymnasium. He took cover in a classroom and only just escaped the horror. In a recent documentary he wasn’t able to talk about his memories of that fateful day. He broke down and had to turn away from the TV camera. His victory at Wimbledon was much more than a personal triumph.

We believe in a God who is in the business of redemption. Turning round disasters, giving hope where there is despair. There is no magic wand to stop them happening in the first place. But there is the hope that the tragedies of life don’t have the last word. Trust in Him for redemption and for his purposes to be worked out in the end. The story of joseph is a story of adversity that finally comes good and serves a purpose.

On one level it’s a kind of ‘pull yourself up by the bootstraps’ account of one man’s rise from slavery to the top job in the land. I read an article in preparation for this sermon which used the story of Joseph as an example of leadership development[[1]](#endnote-1). The article started off by saying how Joseph was a cocky lad, full of dreams and visions about himself and how all the world would bow down to him. The writer said ‘*that’s not unusual for a boy of seventeen. It seems he lived out the saying that goes, ‘solve the world’s problems before you turn twenty – while you still know everything’.*

Joseph was too arrogant for his own good. As you know the story it got him into trouble. His skill at working with people was weak. Worse he lacked experience, wisdom and humility – three qualities that can be gained only with the passage of time. So he then was sold into slavery and obscurity for 13 years before he would stand before Pharaoh and interpret his dreams. He was humbled during that time and changed. Like gold is purified only after it passes repeatedly through the fire and diamonds are created only under extreme pressure, great leaders are only formed through trials.

Joseph would never have reached his potential if he had stayed at home – but he became a slave and a prisoner in order to mature him. Throughout that process the writer of Genesis records how the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper. God blessed Joseph as a slave and as a prisoner. It echoes Jesus words in the passage where Jesus talks about being the vine and we are the branches : that the one who abides in Him and Jesus abides in them, will bear much fruit; for without Him we can do nothing of real value.

In slavery and in prison Joseph learnt about the huge weight of responsibility and received lessons in human nature, relationships and leadership. The process moulded his character. He developed patience, integrity and reliability. If you recall the story, Joseph the slave was put to work in Potiphar’s household. Potiphar was, one of Pharaoh’s officials. Joseph did well and rose up the ranks. Potiphar’s wife, bored housewife syndrome, took a liking to Joseph and wanted him to go to bed with her. Joseph resisted her ‘how could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God’ he said. He had a high moral integrity. He didn’t want to get ahead at any cost.

Sometimes when I watch programmes like the Apprentice I cringe and fear for the future of this country. It gives the impression that to get ahead and be successful you have to be arrogant, unscrupulous and make money at all costs, regardless of the casualties and people you walk all over in the process. Look after only number one. That kind of culture of course led to the banking crisis a few years ago, that still affects us today and I’m not sure if anything has changed in the culture of banking and business since?

Nicky Gumbel on the Alpha Course tells a story of the importance of personal integrity. A friend of his who was a personal assistant for a chief executive of a top London company took a call from someone who asked to speak to the chief executive. The chief told Gumbel’s friend to say he wasn’t in. Gumbel's friend handed the chief executive the phone and said you tell him. Afterwards the chief executive was furious and was at the point of sacking the personal assistant. The PA replied by saying ‘Sir if I can lie for you I can lie to you. I want you know that my words will always be the truth’. The chief executive realised at that moment that this was a person he could trust and the man became vital to that organisation.

Joseph of course is not taken at his word when Potiphar’s wife feels scorned and rejected and takes revenge by accusing Joseph of attempting to rape her. Joseph is thrown in prison. Only in testing do people discover the nature and depth of their character. People can say anything they want about their values, but when the pressure is on, they discover what their values really are.

In prison events so conspire that the cupbearer and the baker of Pharaoh himself end up there next to Joseph and joseph discovers that pharaoh is having troubling dreams. To cut a long story short Joseph is selected to interpret the dreams which predict a severe famine. Joseph is given the task of preparing Egypt for the famine by storing grain in the years of plenty to help in the years of famine. Joseph learnt that God could not use him until he had been tested and proved. When he tried self-promotion – he commended himself to Pharaoh’s chief butler – God again made him wait. Two further years passed before Joseph got an audience with the monarch. By then Joseph had learnt his lesson. He was content to recognise that God is in charge. When Pharaoh asked him to interpret his dreams Joseph answered in chapter 41 verse 16 ‘it is not me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace’. It took a lot of growth but Joseph eventually realised that God was directing the process of his leadership development and he recognised that he was being grown as a leader for a much greater purpose than he could have imagined.

So many people’s dreams and visions are for themselves and their own advancement. Joseph realises later in life, it has to be admitted, that he is serving a bigger purpose. Graduations have been happening up and down the country. If I was speaking at those ceremonies I would want to say to those graduates ‘use your gifts to serve a higher purpose than just yourselves’. It could be argued that our secular, increasingly sceptical and unbelieving nation has lost sense of vocation to a higher purpose.

This higher purpose is revealed in this climactic passage in chapter 45 of Genesis. His brothers have come to Egypt because of the famine in their own land. They are desperately asking for food. Joseph recognises them but they don’t recognise him. He plays games with them, accusing them of espionage and throwing them in prison before sending them back to their homeland to bring back their youngest brother Benjamin. Then joseph keeps him hostage while they go back and get their father. The situation parallels the one Joseph faced many years ago. Will Benjamin likewise be lost to his father Jacob forever? Can the brothers possibly leave Benjamin behind as they did Joseph? Can they tell Jacob that he has lost another one of his sons?

It is at this point that Judah steps up and delivers one of the finest speeches in the whole of scripture in chapter 44. He quickly tells this foreign lord a story that both of them know too well. His focus is on his father and the pain he caused him then. Judah offers himself in place of Benjamin. His father’s well-being is his paramount concern.

Joseph is deeply moved by Judah’s speech. Inside him something shifts. He weeps loudly; ‘I am Joseph’ he reveals. The news is stunning. The brother they thought was dead is alive. They would expect the worst from this news. The guilt they never thought would go away, that they lived with all these years, is finally exposed.

Joseph’s speech in chapter 45 is majestic and regal. It is the speech of one who has power and the wisdom to use it well. He comforts his brothers and then gives the real news, news that makes his self-disclosure minor in comparison. He pulls the curtain to reveal not his identity but the hand of God.

‘It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you’ (verse 5)

‘God sent me ahead of you to ensure that you will have descendants on earth and to preserve for you a host of survivors’ (verse 60

‘It is clear that it was not you who sent me here, but God’ (verse 8)

His speech is masterful and inspired. Joseph can no longer look on his brothers dispassionately, tricking them and trying to exact some revenge. Now comes this awareness which breaks in on all the brothers, including Joseph, with astonishing clarity.

God is behind all this. God is purposeful, involved, active and engaged. The brothers plotted: God planned. Joseph trapped and tricked his brothers: God touched hearts and stirred history. God works in spite of human effort and through events that appear to have their own rules and logic. Mundane matters are not what they seem. Behind their appearance is the reality of the will of God.

God’s sovereignty is the issue here. Celia Brewer Sinclair, comments in the Genesis Study book[[2]](#endnote-2) that some of you used with our house fellowships in the spring, that *‘if the rule of God is understood as compulsion, we miss the point. God is not tyrannical and coercive, while we are puppets programmed to do ‘God’s will’, as if this was set in stone or hard wired into us. God’s rule allows for human freedom. ‘You sold me here’ is true. Joseph’s brothers acted in this way. ‘God sent me before you’ is also true. God wants the family together again. God does not compel but invites and calls and prompts. The freedom of humanity to respond or not is maintained. But their actions are drawn into God’s larger purpose for good.*

There is nothing flashy in the story of Joseph in the way God guides and directs. There is nothing like Jacob wrestling with an angel or Abraham being visited repeatedly. Nothing is direct or explicit. Like our own world, profane and secular it seems ‘obvious’ that God no longer addresses us with direct speech and extraordinary promises. But there is the amazed affirmation that the whole story has been God’s story, in and through and despite of human activity.

Sometimes you sit back and you realise that what you thought were setbacks or disappointments seem to be taken up and used for a higher purpose. We pray in our meetings – God guide us – we lay our plans open to you. It is a dangerous prayer – but also a necessary prayer. Believe it. Trust God to guide. It may take time but you will come to the point one day and look back and say ‘it wasn’t us – but God….’

Joseph was the human provider for their needs in this story of famine. But they all know that God is the real provider. It is the consistent testimony of scripture that those who commit their way to the Lord, God will bless and provide. Do not be anxious, or grasping. God is in control.

The end of the story sees the brothers of Joseph settle in Egypt. Jacob, their father, dies and they become anxious about their future again and prostrate themselves in front of Joseph asking him for forgiveness and crying ‘we are your slaves ‘(50.18). It is the fulfilment of Joseph’s original dream at the start of his story.

But this time the dream is not what Joseph wants at all. ‘Forgiveness is the Lord’s’ Joseph reminds them. ‘Am I in the place of God’ he says in chapter 50 verse 19. From his perspective, the wrong they have done him years ago has vanished and been transformed to allow Joseph to save lives. ‘You meant to do harm, but God meant to bring good out of it ‘(50.20). Don’t be afraid. Have no fear he says to them. The family stands under the protection of God and reconciliation has occurred. Intentional evil is transformed into deliberate blessing.

So pray God’s purposes into all the events of your life and pray for God’s blessing even through those harmful events that they may be used for good.

1. J C Maxwell, the 21 Most powerful minutes in a leaders Day, Nelson Pub, 2000 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. C B Sinclair, Genesis IBS, WJK Press 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)