**7th July 2013**

**Genesis 37.1-11**

There are three parts to this sermon:

First – The Dreamer – there’s always one in the family!

Second – I have a dream – daydreaming with God

Third – when dreams don’t come true.

**First of all: There’s always one in the family?**

There were two things about my brother that used to annoy me. At meal time when I was a young boy, my brother who is nine years older than me, used to lean over and nick food off my plate. I would be lining up a nice sausage, put a fork full of peas in my mouth, look down and the sausage would have been swiped.

The other annoying habit my brother had was not finishing games, especially when he was losing. We would be playing table top subbueteo football, and I would be winning by a few goals and then he would announce that he needed the toilet and the match would be suspended whilst he went upstairs. Half an hour later he still hadn’t come down and I got bored and went off and did something else.

If you have siblings, I’m sure there is something that annoys you about them.

The story of Joseph is at one level a story of how annoying your own family can be.

The thing is that if you ask my brother he would probably tell you his version of events and how I’d annoy him. He would probably say I was full of myself and being the youngest, a perception that I got away with more than he did and had special privileges and was put more on a pedestal.

This whole sermon could be on dysfunction in families and why we annoy each other. But that might be too negative and depressing. I’ll just say a couple of things.

There is no justification for Joseph’s brother’s faking his death and selling him off into slavery. Whatever your family problems I doubt they get as bad as that – so count your blessings (that’s by way of encouragement). However all the members of this family have in some way contributed to the chaos and the drama that ensues.

Jacob the father, like his father before him, Isaac, breaks the first rule of parenting: he shows favouritism to one of his children. You think Jacob would have learnt after his rivalry with his brother Esau nearly cost him his life. But no – the cycle is continued. This deeply flawed character hasn’t learnt from his father’s mistake.

Joseph has special gifts and boy doesn’t he know it. Some people in life are gifted yet humble. They don’t go round telling other people how good they are. Vanity and self-promotion doesn’t win you friends. Joseph shows no self-awareness and respect for his brother’s feelings but is the centre of his own universe. Look at me – aren’t I good. He is cruising for a bruising as they say. Raise yourself up and you are asking to be knocked down. It gets worse when he has this dream whereby all his brothers will one day bow down to him. As the story progresses of course it turns out to be true. But come on let’s face it – Joseph should have kept his mouth shut. Anyone with an inch of self-awareness would have realised that sharing such views would only pour petrol on the flames of envy and hatred.

Finally the brothers still could choose how they reacted to Joseph. They could have stopped at the point of feeling annoyed and hurt by their kid brother’s insensitive remarks and even better been honest enough to tell Joseph they weren’t happy with his attitude. Families when they work well knock the rough edges of each other. But in this family there isn’t that degree of intimacy and honesty – so instead they nurse envy and hatred that seizes the opportunity to kill their brother in all but actual fact.

Sometimes if there is a problem in a family the family rounds on one of its own – there’s always one! They act as a scapegoat for all the family’s ills and dysfunction. In actual fact all the members of the family and how they relate to each other, as part of a system – needs to be addressed to move them out of the problem. There isn’t always one – in other words.

**Secondly, Joseph was a dreamer**. Dreams are fascinating things. Apparently we fall asleep in stages going from light sleep to deep sleep with REM (rapid eye movement) in each sleep cycle. We can dream at any stage of sleep but REM dreams tend to be more vivid, complex and because they come at the end of a sleep cycle. If we wake naturally these are the dreams we are mostly likely to remember. The bible has a number of stories of individuals feeling as though God has communicated with them in their dreams and they wake with new purpose or understanding, hope and direction. I’ve known a number of people who have had dreams or visions. Some of them are rather general and uncheck able and though edifying and helpful they were, at worst, harmless. Sometimes they have been vindicated by events and confirmed in some other detail. Sometimes perhaps they were wishful thinking – or expressions of inner anxieties or fears, hopes or repressed emotions. However just because it’s the kind of thing that a person may want to happen or say – doesn’t mean it’s not from God. An open, yet discerning and critical stance I would advocate. Inevitably there is a bit of the wait and see aspect to all dreams and visions.

Dreamers do get a bad press though. The term can be a bit derogatory. ‘He’s a dreamer’ – we say it in such a way that the person is detached from reality, head in the clouds, of no good to anyone. Our society prizes rationality, materialism, the objective over the subjective, the empirical over the speculative – something that can be verified, tested.

However dreams and visions are so important in life to take us forward. From dreaming about what you would like to do with your life, what you want to be when you grow up, to dreaming about what kind of church do you want help create and be – you dream for the future, you envision a new reality and then walk towards it to try and make it a reality. Godly dreaming is all about that.

Think of the power of the vision to move people forward. Most famously of course was Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream speech in 1963. At the height of the Civil Rights movement in the United States he addressed hundreds of thousands of supporters on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in Washington. His speech, which will see its fiftieth anniversary in August, is often rated as the most inspirational and important speech of all time.

Yet the most famous and often quoted bit of it only came about as a last minute addition. Martin Luther king had come to the end of his written speech in which he has given a measured and reasoned argument for the abandonment of racial segregation. It was solid thoughtful stuff. But as is often the way with black preachers they only get going when the congregation get going with them and give them encouragement to say more and to preach from the heart. And when they reach for the heart and the soul then the spirit is at work to move the hearts and soul of the listeners. If you notice in the old black and white film clips of the speech King pauses just before he launches into the ‘I have a dream section of his speech. Jesse Jackson said he was standing near him at the time and thought he needed to spur King on: he shouted to him ‘Martin tell us about the dream’ share the dream Martin. King went on, drawing from the biblical imagery and hope that was such a part of his being:

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

*This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. I have a dream….*

Tell us your dreams – release the dreams – change reality, envisage a new reality.

I’ve just been on a conference looking at the possibility of church growth in the United Reformed Church, our denomination. I was selected to attend from our Synod because this church is seen by others as a growing church. The conference was very good and very stimulating. The key speaker was Revd. John Daniels from the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. He was wary of suggesting any neat formulas or ten point plans that would bring growth to a church. But he did say many things that were helpful.

For me the insight he offered was that growth takes place where there is vision, passion and dissatisfaction. Vision is there for the dream of a new future – it gives purpose and direction, something to aim for. That’s where you want to be. Passion is needed to get there – the energy needed to make the change, the effervescence that buzzes people and motivates people to make change happen. Dissatisfaction provides the momentum, because you are so fed up

with how things are that you will be motivated enough to move on.

He said if there is no passion but only dissatisfaction with what is and a longing for what could be – all you end up with is criticism. No one is willing to put the energy in to make the difference and move forward. If you have no vision but only dissatisfaction and passion you end up going round in circles expending energy here and there but not actually moving forward. No dissatisfaction but vision and passion – you talk a lot and plan and pretend to get excited – but actually you still comfortable where you are – you are not dissatisfied enough to get up and turn the latent energy into kinetic energy.

*Our elders are meeting next Saturday for a day together to prayerfully consider where we are going as a church. My intention is that they will be addressing these three areas of our vision, our passion and our dissatisfaction.* The latter in particular is interesting because it is the source of conflicts, things that people are dissatisfied with. Conflicts always hold potential for change and growth if you handle them with love. In the conversations and dialogue can come deeper understanding, even resolutions, even if it’s to agree to disagree. A church that is satisfied with itself is in danger of losing the plot, of decline and inertia.

There’s a challenge to us. Are you dissatisfied with how things are? Can it be better? Is there more. Can you dream where it is, where the future lies. Have you got the passion, the energy to go there?

Finally I want to talk about when dreams don’t come true. On a personal level, we can’t all be brain surgeons. It’s a popular mantra, the American Dream; that anyone can make it, realize their dreams. It’s the disneyfication of human aspiration. But in reality there is a lot of failure. Many people's dreams don’t come true. It can be dispiriting, and deflating to keep getting knock backs in life. Rejections, closed doors. There are high levels of unemployment at the moment, especially for the young. How some people need a break. But like the wannabe celebrities auditioning for the X factor, our gifts may not lie in where our dreams are telling us to go. Dreams dashed are some of life’s harshest lessons and challenge peoples’ character and resolve.

Remember the story I told a few weeks ago in the all age slot, at the height of summer school exams about the little kid who was playing cricket by himself in the backyard. He said ‘I’m the best batsman in the world’ threw the tennis ball against the wall’ played and missed. He picked it up and threw it again, saying ‘I’m the best batsmen in the world’. Played and missed. He did it a third time and for a third time he missed. He picked up the bowler and instead of despairing, changed his attitude and outlook. ‘I’m the best bowler in the world’ he said.

Joseph’s dream about him ruling over his brothers and the whole family bowing down to him would eventually come true. But right now it as he is sold into slavery in Egypt, it is laughable. His dream appears dashed.

God is not mentioned much in this story but there is a remarkable declaration of faith by Joseph in chapter 45. You could say it’s the punch line to the story. As you know the story, even if it is courtesy of Andrew Lloyd Webber and his musical, Joseph ends up looking after pharaoh’s affairs and ensures there is enough food stored away for the years of famine. His brothers come to Egypt desperate for food and eventually realize that Joseph is in charge and is able to help them. Here is what he says: Chapter 45 verse 7:

‘God sent me ahead of you to ensure that you will have descendants on earth, and to preserve for you a host of survivors. It is clear that it was not you who sent me here, but God.’

Wow, that’s faith and trust. Joseph didn’t say that at the time when he was beaten up and sold into slavery. He didn’t say then ‘but god’. But now things are clearer. In time the dream clarifies, events reveal, - in time he is able to say ‘but God’.

Are your dreams dashed? Are you wondering what now? I have no easy answers. Hang on in faith. Hang on to the phrase ‘but God’. ‘But God’.

One final story – which I shared on the church weekend last week as we came to the communion service. John Bell led the minister's conference a couple of weeks ago (sorry I have been away a lot) and shared with us a story about George McLeod the founder of the Iona Community and the restorer of the Iona Abbey. McLeod in the 1930s was a parish minister in the Church of Scotland in the Govan area of Glasgow, the most deprived area of that city. He was nationally famous as a great orator and preacher, yet locally he was known for his pastoral care and compassion.

One well known story was how he took home communion to a woman who was dying of throat cancer. This was the 1930s and there wasn’t the palliative care we have today. This would be a horrible death, literally by choking as the cancer enlarged and stopped the woman from breathing. She was near the end of her life and could hardly drink, let alone swallow. McLeod didn’t try to offer her bread for communion. But for the wine he opened a bottle of expensive champagne. Remember this is 1930s Govan in Glasgow, the poorest of the poor. Expensive champagne. McLeod said this champagne is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits you. The best is yet to come. You may have had a rough deal in this life, but know that with God you are precious and special. You may be dying to this life, but know that you are destined for eternity. This may seem the end, but God has other plans’.

But God.

Keep dreaming.