

GOD, JOSEPH AND HIS FAMILY

Sermon Preached by Rev Laurel Barr

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Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

The story of Joseph and his “multi-coloured” coat is very well-known. It is a favourite Sunday School story, and Andrew Lloyd Webber made it into a popular musical called *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dream-coat*. Our lectionary reading of the Story of Joseph today moves very swiftly from the gift of the special long-sleeved coat to the terrible brothers’ action. So what is the story here?

Joseph was the young son of Jacob. He had been born to Jacob’s beloved Rachel for whom he worked 14 long years to pay the bride price. Joseph was the youngest, along with Benjamin, among 12 brothers who had different mothers among Jacob’s wives and concubines. His elderly father doted upon him and he was very spoiled. Jacob kept Joseph nearby around the homestead.

The other sons spent their days and nights out in the fields looking after the family clan’s flocks and herds. Sometimes they were forced to go long distances in search of pasture. It was hard work. And so it was that one fateful day the seventeen year old Joseph was sent off by his father to see how his brothers were getting on.

The brothers saw Joseph coming. As he came closer, his special coat flapping in the breeze, they remembered how he had checked on them before, and gone back to their father with tell-tale ill-reports. Their resentment boiled over and they began plotting their revenge. They planned to get rid of him by killing him and throwing his body into a pit. Only the eldest, Reuben spoke up on behalf of his young brother. He thought of a way to delay the murder and he suggested they put him into the pit alive. He intended to return that night and rescue him. So they stripped Joseph of the magnificent coat and put him into the pit.

However there’s another twist. We don’t know why but Reuben wasn’t present when another brother Judah persuaded the brothers that they could rid themselves of Joseph by selling him to a party of foreign slave-traders who happened to come by with their caravan of camels.

And so they sold their young brother for twelve shekels of silver and he was taken off to Egypt as a slave.

It’s a very sorry story. Indeed it contains the stuff of Shakespearean tragedy or even television soap opera with its many twist and turns, flawed characters, dreams, inheritance issues, family tensions and vengeance. Bruce Prewer (<http://alphalink.com.au/nigel/DocA/48SUN19.htm>) the Australian preacher makes some very helpful points about this story. He observes -

It speaks of the foolishness of a father who has a favourite child and bestows favours.

It speaks of the dangerous sibling rivalry that in this case gets out of hand and does tragic things.

It speaks of the cowardice of an elder brother who will not openly go against the majority to do what is right.

When you look at it like that, this very human story evokes a thousand situations we may have seen in our community - in our culture - even in our own families:

The parent who has a favourite child

Toxic sibling rivalry and tensions

The cowardice of an elder sibling who will not stand up to the others.

So, let's look more closely:

First there is a foolish old Jacob dotting on his younger favourite child, keeping him close, excusing him from the work his brothers are expected to do, bestowing special gifts and all the time seemingly unaware of what this is doing among his children:

You would think that Jacob would have been more aware. He should have remembered the hatred that had developed in his own and previous generations between siblings that can be traced back to parental favouritism.

After all this is the same Jacob, the favourite son of his mother Rebecca, who as a young man had deceived his own elderly father Isaac and his elder twin Esau into selling his birthright - and what consequences that led to! Jacob fled for his life and was afraid to come home for years to come.

Furthermore Jacob's Grandfather Abraham had chosen between Isaac his second son, born to Sarah, and his elder son Ishmael, born to his concubine mother Hagar. He sent Ishmael and Hagar off into the desert where they might have perished if God had not been watching over them.

Actually in the Bible, this favouring of younger sons continues forward to King David himself a younger brother. Even into the New Testament with the story Jesus told of the Forgiving Father who throws a party for his returning Prodigal Son, thereby inflaming resentment in the heart of his Older Brother who had worked hard and faithfully - just as Jacob's older sons worked long long hours looking after the flocks and herds while Joseph had an easy time back in the house.

We too know what this is about: I don't know about you but as the eldest of four girls in my family I have a fleeting sympathy for the brothers. I am sure that my parents were far more lenient with my younger sisters.

And parents who have favourites, who spoil their children, parents who protect their children from taking responsibility in life, and parents who want their children to outshine the others is not confined to the ancients.

This ancient family saga speaks of how hard it is sometimes to be good parents and good grandparents, aunts and uncles. Being parents - being part of a family - is not easy for a whole host of reasons. Each child - each member - is unique with different needs, so that it can be very difficult to give them all equally our attention. We need the wisdom of Solomon, and patience and grace of angels!

Yet the issues the story raises are important because this story also speaks about rivalry that can develop between siblings.

Joseph the precocious son is a very gifted young man who does not have the maturity to deal with it. If we had heard the whole story we would have read about how Joseph is a dreamer. Joseph also has a special gift of interpreting the meaning of dreams. And when he has dreams in which his brothers - even his father - bow down to him, he cannot help himself in telling them, and it gets their backs up. Added to this, he flaunts their father's gift of the special coat before them.

Among Jacob's sons, their resentment grows and simmers until in that field far from the house where Joseph is alone and vulnerable, deep emotions boil over and everything gets out of hand - abduction, thoughts of murder commuted to slavery in a far off land, deception and, when he finds out, Jacob's inconsolable grief is the result. A family torn apart .

It's heavy stuff and then there is **Reuben's lack of courage to stop his brothers and prevent a tragedy.**

Reuben knows things are out of hand. He knows how wrong it is to plan the death of their young sibling and he wants to do the right thing yet when the chips are down and his brothers are mad with envy and anger and plotting vengeance he can not stand up to them. And for whatever reason we do not know - the story in Genesis does not say - Reuben is not there at the crucial moment. Has he run away from the conflict? Chickened out when he should have stood up? Yes, he had plans to come back behind their backs and rescue Joseph, but then it is all too late. Joseph is gone and he has to find an explanation for his father.

To put it bluntly it's a mess. Here is a family - dysfunctional, divided, harbouring a terrible secret.

Yet behind this scenario there is hope. You see God does not give up on this very flawed family - God did not give up on Abraham and Isaac. God did not give up on Jacob as a younger man.

Indeed Jacob himself had dreams in which he wrestled with God and heard God's promises to him. And now God persists with this less than ideal family. Indeed God will be with Joseph the slave in Egypt. In the end Joseph will prosper and despite their flaws and the terrible thing that the brothers did to Joseph and their grieving father, God does not give up on them. They will play a vital role in God's plans for his people. The story goes on.

Indeed the whole family will end up in Egypt and through many twists and turns in the history of their people, God will always be there for them. God brings their descendants out of slavery, providing for them along their perilous journey through the wilderness until they reach the promised land.

And friends this is good news for you and me. The story of Jacob and Joseph and their family is a very human story.

It speaks of the complexities of family relationships and of human frailty. It tells a story of foolishness and hurts and grief, of rivalry and jealousy and even vengeance, of estrangement and regrets, of secrets and flawed characters. Many aspects of this story may well resonate with us.

And despite all that, the God of Jacob and Reuben and Joseph, our God sticks with us. God is faithful. God works his purposes out. Each and every family in whatever form is important to God despite our serious shortcomings!