

Reflective Worship
Sunday 4th February

Genesis 37 – from slavery to the promised land

As we approach and then move through Lent, Holy Week and Easter we will rightly be thinking about the story of salvation – the suffering, sacrificial death and ultimately the resurrection of Jesus. As we do so we will no doubt refer to the many parallels with the story of the Exodus, the story of the people of Israel being freed from slavery in Egypt and being led into the promised land. Over the next few months in Reflective worship we will look at the Exodus story and see how it can help us in our understanding of our own story of salvation through Christ.

But since we are not yet in Lent I hope you will forgive me for starting this mini series before we even get to Exodus – we will start this evening in the closing chapters of the first book of the Bible – Genesis. We are going to start with the story of Joseph.

And the reason I want to do that is because the story of Joseph tells us how the people of Israel got into the mess, into Egypt, in the first place. If it wasn't for what happened to Joseph then the Exodus would not have been necessary. And it too has many parallels with our own mess, our own Egypts from which we are saved by the cross.

So let's first remind ourselves of the story – or at least that section of the Joseph story in Genesis chapter 37. Let me set the scene.

Jacob – the grandson of Abraham – had many children by his many wives and concubines. His true love was Rachel but he (who was as we know a bit of a trickster himself) had been tricked by Laban into marrying Leah, Rachel's sister – both of them Laban's daughters. Jacob later married Rachel as well. Over time Joseph had 12 sons by his two wives and two concubines, but his sons by Rachel – his youngest two sons Joseph and Benjamin – were his favourites. As you might imagine with such a situation, family life was not exactly harmonious!

And let's note first where this story starts. It starts in Canaan. The same piece of land that later becomes known as the promised land. If we follow the story through to Egypt, the enslavement, the exodus and the wilderness wanderings we end up back in the same place we started. The land of Canaan. So in terms of land, what happened between Joseph and his brothers was the reason there had to be an exodus. But perhaps the exodus was about far more than land.

Read Genesis 37

There are many characters in the story, because there were many in the family. Each played a role, and each one was part of the problem.

Jacob. He was a favourite son. His mother Rebecca colluded with him as he tricked his brother Esau out of his inheritance and blessing from Isaac which was rightfully his. Favouritism that in the past had led to division, mistrust and hatred. And now Jacob brings a similar favouritism into his own family.

We just read “Now Israel (ie Jacob) loved Joseph more than any other of his children”. Jacob was content enough to live off the hard work of his other sons as they cared for the flocks, but he let his favouritism show. He spoilt Joseph. He gave him the famous coat of many colours – clearly a very special and costly garment. He treated him on a different level to the way he treated the rest of the family.

Even after Joseph had the dreams of the sheaves bowing down, and the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him, and although Jacob rebuked Joseph, he still “kept the matter in mind”. Maybe he was secretly hoping for his favoured son to be the special one. The one who would rule over the others.

This was favouritism on a grand scale, and, unsurprisingly, it began to eat away at the family. We can perhaps see what brought it on. Rachel was the one Jacob loved most; she had died giving birth to Joseph’s brother Benjamin. Perhaps Jacob saw Rachel in Joseph. Maybe he was still in denial about her death; its interesting to note what he said to Joseph about the dreams “Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow down before you”. A telling phrase “and your mother”. Rachel was of course dead.

Joseph was brought up in an environment where, in his father’s eyes, he could do no wrong. Hardly his fault. But, like so many gifted and favoured people through the ages, he failed to see what effect his unthinking actions and words might have on others. He failed to recognise what seems obvious to us that his brothers resented him because of the way he was being treated by Jacob. He was self-centred – we read of the bad report of his brothers that he brought to Jacob. And his actions and words, particularly in sharing the contents of his dreams, just made things worse.

And his brothers. We might understand their resentment and frustration, but I am sure we would not condone their actions. Once they were out of sight of Jacob they seized an opportunity to get rid of Joseph. “Here comes the dreamer. Let us kill him And we shall see what becomes of his dreams”. It was bad enough with Jacob favouring Joseph, but the prospect (as foretold in the dreams) of Joseph ruling over them was intolerable. They could see only one solution.

Both Reuben and Judah are singled out as having slightly different plans, but they can hardly be thought of as the good guys on Joseph’s side. On the face of it Reuben seems to want to spare Joseph, but it looks like his intention was to curry favour

with Jacob for himself. He would be the one to return Joseph to his father; he would get the credit and, he no doubt hoped, the favour.

And Judah – perhaps he was unsure about committing a murder, but he was not against getting some money out of it all. He was very happy to sell Joseph off into the unknown, into a future that promised only suffering and slavery. And in the end he got his way.

How did all this end? For Jacob – in deep sadness and grief. For Joseph – in slavery. For the brothers – who knows? I doubt the family situation improved much, but I am sure they had to live every day with guilt – something that was still evident all those years later when they finally met Joseph again in Egypt.

So a sorry tale that began with division, jealousy and hatred. Which led to unfairness, selfishness, very nearly to murder and certainly to one enormous mess. A story that started in the promised land and ended in slavery.

A bit like the human story which, in scripture, starts in the promised land of the Garden of Eden and, after disobedience, division and selfishness ends up with life being a constant struggle, with the desire to follow God's way almost always being eclipsed by the urge to do things our way. A tendency to mess things up or, in biblical language, slavery to sin.

Perhaps we see sin as something big – which it sometimes is – but more often its just the way we make a mess of things. By bad decisions, selfish thoughts, suspect motives, thoughtless actions, careless words. Whatever. And as those actions and thoughts and motives and words accumulate the pile of mess gets bigger and bigger. Soon we are trapped by it and effectively enslaved by it. Soon there seems to be no way out.

And its to free us from this mess that Jesus went to the cross. So that we could be freed from its grip over us, and brought to the promised land where God welcomes us with open arm to live the fulfilled life that Jesus promised.

So this evening, we think of the accumulated mess that entraps each one of us; the mess perhaps caused by our actions, words and thoughts and the mess brought upon us by the actions and words of others. And we bring that mess – in the form of the stones which you have on your seat – to Jesus. We will leave the mess at the foot of the cross. And we will take in exchange a clean sheet of paper, as a sign of the new start and the new life Jesus offers. And perhaps we can take this opportunity to write on that piece of paper something of our hopes and dreams for a future where we are not defined by our pasts but freed for the future by Gods love in Jesus.