

Sermon.2025.02.23 Seventh after Epiphany

Let's start with the story of Joseph – the OT Joseph we heard about in the first reading. Like his NT namesake, he's a dreamer (Remember, the NT Joseph who was betrothed to Mary dreamt that the wise men should not go back to Herod as they'd planned, and that he and his family – Mary and Jesus – should disappear for a while, into Egypt).

Well OT Joseph was also a dreamer – it's as if dreaming goes with the name Joseph. Today's incident is one of the most dramatic in the Bible, a moment when an identity is revealed to the acute embarrassment and shame of one or more of the people present. It's not the only example of this – there's a similar incident in the story of Esther, but let's stick with the OT Joseph for now, and the incident needs to be heard in context for its full dramatic weight to be felt.

The story goes like this: Joseph is a dreamer, and he's also his dad's favourite – never a great start when there are other kids, in this case 10 older half-brothers, who are likely to feel envious of their dad's favouritism. There's a back-story to this favouritism: the father, Jacob, had been tricked on his wedding night into a marrying not the woman he thought he was marrying, but her possibly not-so-pretty older sister. He gets to marry the younger sister as well, but is always understandably

resentful of this trickery. The younger sister, Rachel, is the one he's always been in love with, and she's the mother of Joseph. The half-brothers are all children of either the older sister or concubines (and of course there's another story behind that as well – it's all there in the book of Genesis if you want to read it for yourselves!)

Joseph is the dreamer of the family, and the favourite, and the youngest (until Rachel gives birth to his younger brother Benjamin – it's a very complicated family story; it'd make a great mini-series). Joseph is also a bit stupid. Because he's the favourite he looks down on his older half-brothers and doesn't bother to hide this unpleasant rather teenage arrogance - and he tells them his dreams, even the ones that seem to suggest that he'll be their boss. Understandably, this annoys the hell out of them; one of Joseph's dreams even annoys Jacob.

Anyways, the older half-brothers wait for their chance to rid themselves of their annoying younger brother, and their chance comes when they're all out in the desert and no one around to check on them. Reuben, one of the half-brothers, has a conscience about this persuades his siblings not to kill Joseph; just to imprison him in a dry well. He plans to free Joseph and send him home with a warning. But before he can do that, the others find an opportunity to sell Joseph as a slave – 20 pieces of silver is what they get for him. The details in the story are uncannily precise.

Joseph is sold into Egyptian slavery and the half-brothers presume they're rid of him for good. Wrong! So wrong! Joseph has a number of adventures in Egypt and – partly because of his pre-Freudian, pre-Jungian understanding of the whole business of dreaming and interpreting dreams, he rises to be governor of Egypt, and even – as he eventually puts it to his brothers in the moment of encounter we heard of today – something of a father-figure to the pharaoh himself.

And, there's a famine – I'm sure you know the story; the brothers come to Egypt to buy food, and appear before the governor – whom they fail to recognise. He's dressed as an Egyptian, he speaks to them through an interpreter, and above all, he's the last person they're expecting to see. He takes the opportunity to play a few practical jokes on them, and eventually – when he finally meets his own younger brother Benjamin – is overcome with emotion and speaks to them, in their own language. This is the moment we have heard about today. What he says to them is this: There is a reason behind what you did all those years ago; in selling me to be taken as a slave to Egypt. It was so that you and your families would eventually be saved from this famine. The famine was always going to happen; but what you did was your own choice – a bad choice, and the consequences are ones that you've brought upon yourselves - but it's produced this good outcome.

It's a nice, happy-ending to the story – but it leaves us with a question. If God intervenes in this way to pull us out of something bad that we've – at least partly -

brought upon ourselves, could it be that God also does the opposite, that is, punishes the evil-doer with misfortune? Isn't that what's happened here to the brothers of Joseph – they've been punished for what they'd done?

The brothers of Joseph were punished, in a way: they were put to shame by the brother they'd betrayed. So there is a sort of punishment for wrong-doing. But is all misfortune, then, a sign of God's punishment? Was the famine a matter of God's punishment?

Well, No! It was a natural occurrence – and in this story, Joseph interprets his own misfortune, and the wrong-doing against him by his brothers, as God's way of responding to a natural disaster that was always going to happen sooner or later. God's response is to prepare for a way of the family of Jacob to survive this disaster. This is how Joseph interprets this chain of events, and I think that's what we've meant to see in it. Joseph interprets God as a responsive God, who does not avoid or turn away natural disasters or human betrayals from taking place, but responds to their consequences – responds in a loving and life-giving and life-preserving way.