

# Joseph and his brothers Part 1

A sermon given on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> August 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings           **Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28** (Proper 14 RCL Year A)  
                          Psalm 105:1-6,16-22; Matthew 13:54-58

## The Technicolour Dreamcoat

The story of Joseph is one of the best-known and best-loved in the Bible, no doubt partly because of Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice's enduring musical which many of us first came across at primary school. The title "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat" implies that what we should remember about Joseph was his coloured coat and his dreams. There's a lot more to the story – a massive amount more – but let's start with these two ideas.

You'll accuse me of being a spoilsport, but actually the Hebrew words in Genesis 37:3 probably don't say that the coat had many colours, rather that it had long sleeves. However, what is important about it is what it tells us about Joseph's status in the family. He was the second youngest, but was his dad's favourite, because he was the elder son of Jacob's favourite wife Rachel, who had died giving birth to Joseph's brother Benjamin. The special coat or robe that Jacob gave Joseph represented his love for Rachel, and the way Joseph reminded him of her; but for Joseph's elder brothers it was a symbol of favouritism. No one else would ever be as special in their father's eyes as Joseph. And when there are 12 brothers and an unknown number of sisters all vying for their father's attention, Joseph's coat becomes a symbol of all that is unfair about Jacob's style of parenting. You might have thought that Jacob would have learnt a lesson from the way he had fallen out with his own brother Esau all those years ago, and tried to avoid being seen to favour Joseph over his brothers. Perhaps his treatment of Joseph was a sign that he had never come to terms with losing Rachel.

## The young Joseph

So what can we know about the character of the young Joseph? Well, he certainly doesn't start off very well. Verse 2 tells us that Jacob had assigned him to help his older brothers Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, and Joseph got into trouble with them for bringing a bad report of them to their father. It sounds like the young Joseph was a bit of a goody-goody who told dad when his 4 adult brothers were misbehaving – perhaps getting drunk or messing around with the servant-girls. Joseph, with adolescent arrogance, thinks he's invincible, and revels in the special status his father has given him.

Which brings us on to the dreams. Just after the bit about the fancy coat, the narrator goes on to tell us (and this bit was missed out in our lectionary reading) that Joseph had two dreams which only seemed to reinforce his special status. This is how he tells it to his family:

'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup> There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' <sup>8</sup> His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

<sup>9</sup> He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' <sup>10</sup> But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?' <sup>11</sup> So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (Genesis 37:6-11 NRSV)

What is all this about – delusions of grandeur and a superiority complex in the mind of a spoilt teenager? This is certainly how the brothers and even Jacob himself treat these revelations. But the narrator hints that there is much more to it than this, as he indicates by those last few words “but his father kept the matter in mind”. He is saying to us, the readers, that we also need to keep the matter in mind, because it will prove to be important later in the story. Does this remind you of the way Mary pondered over the words of the shepherds who visited the baby Jesus, as well as the other events of Jesus’ childhood? (Luke 2:29).

### **The back story**

What should we make of this story so far? For a family that is going to develop into the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God, this is not a good start. To be fair to Jacob, he never intended to have 4 wives. You could say that one thing led to another. In Genesis chapter 29 we read how he works for his uncle Laban for 7 years in return for Rachel’s hand in marriage, only to find on the morning after his wedding night that he had slept with Rachel’s sister Leah, whom the deceitful Laban had substituted under cover of darkness and Jacob’s alcoholic haze. When Rachel can’t get pregnant, Jacob has to sleep with her maid Bilhah, a sort of surrogate mother, and then with Leah’s maid Zilpah<sup>1</sup>. Managing 4 wives, 12 sons and an unquantified number of daughters is more than Jacob’s interpersonal skills can cope with, and we see him struggling to keep everyone happy and safe. Into the bargain, his relationship with his uncle Laban becomes more and more strained, to the point where he eventually packs up and takes his whole family, with all their herds of sheep and goats, back to the land of Canaan.

In spite of it all, Jacob holds onto the promise which God made him in the dream that he had at Bethel when he was fleeing from Esau – the one with the stairway to heaven<sup>2</sup>. God does indeed bless Jacob and keeps him safe. Jacob’s fear of meeting his brother Esau forces him to turn to God for help, and he has the wisdom to humble himself before Esau, which leads to reconciliation.

### **A dysfunctional family**

But now our attention turns to sibling rivalry between Jacob’s own children. Tension has built up to the point where Jacob’s 10 older sons plot to do away with their obnoxious, self-opinionated seventeen-year-old kid brother in a deserted location many miles from home:

‘Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’ (37:19-20).

The hated special coat is ripped from Joseph’s back and later dipped in goat’s blood and shown to the distraught Jacob with the words ‘This we have found; see now whether it is your son’s robe or not.’ (37:32).

If you ever thought the Bible was about the lives of idealised saints, think again. If you compare the family you grew up in with Jacob’s family, I suspect you had it easy. If you have children, you may well know the difficulties of dealing with competing demands for attention, and making each one feel loved for who they are without being compared with their brothers and sisters. No parent is perfect, and we all make mistakes. We all need God’s help to do the best we can, and we need to trust him for the future.

Maybe your experience of family life as you grew up was tough. Perhaps you are still bearing the scars of wounds inflicted by those who should have protected you, believed in you and helped you to grow up healthily. Perhaps your experience of family life as an adult has been disappointing or even traumatic. Well, hang on in there, because the story of Jacob’s family has a happy ending. In next week’s instalment of the story of Joseph we shall find that God can work in the most unexpected ways, and even turn our experiences of injustice, chaos and hurt into blessing for us and for others.

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<sup>1</sup> In this case it’s because Leah can’t produce any more children.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 28:10-22

The narrator of the Joseph story, by clever use of language, hints at the way the plot will twist and turn and end up with blessing, reconciliation and healing. “We shall see what will become of his dreams”, say the brothers to each other as they seek to make Joseph pay for being his father’s favourite. Well, we will indeed see what will become of the dreams. Next week, in Part 2 of the story of Joseph, we shall see how God works through the characters and behind the scenes to make it all come right. (We’ve already had a summary in today’s Psalm<sup>3</sup>). And of course, let’s not forget that God chose this very imperfect family to become the nation through whom he would reveal his nature and bring about his purposes, ultimately through his own Son being born into that nation, so that he could die and rise again to redeem the world.

But in the meanwhile, I shan’t mind if you take a sneak preview of what happens after Joseph is sold as a slave in Egypt. Please read Genesis chapters 39-44 between now and then. It’s not just a good story about how Joseph says no to Potiphar’s beautiful wife, and how he interprets the dreams of the butler, the baker and Pharaoh himself, and becomes prime minister of Egypt. It’s also about how Joseph grows from a spoilt teenager into a responsible young man, and how the brothers come to face up to the enormity of what they have done, not only to Joseph but to their father. Next week’s episode, which takes place 20 years after the events of chapter 37, is one of the most emotional in the Bible, as Joseph’s brothers face the boy they sold as a slave 20 years earlier. It also sees Joseph finally putting all the pieces together, to understand how God has worked through all the mess and hurt to rescue his people from death.

### **Good news for us**

The story of Jacob’s family may be a warning to us to avoid some of the mistakes they made. But more importantly it shows us how God doesn’t write people off because of their mistakes or even their deliberate acts of selfishness and violence. And that applies to us, however checkered our history, or whatever injustices others may have done to us. Joseph’s suffering will become a means of redemption, not only for himself, or even for his family, but for millions of others. It reminds me of what God did one Good Friday on a cross outside Jerusalem and on the following Easter morning. But that is another story.

*Prayer:* Heavenly Father, you have known us from before our birth, and are familiar with every detail of our lives. You have been with us in all our experiences, in our successes and failures, in our joy and in our sorrow, in our faith and in our uncertainty. You know our strengths and our weaknesses, our triumphs and the wounds we still bear. Thank you that your love for us is unfailing, that you never give up on us and are always beside us to equip us and to guide us into your perfect plans for our lives and for your world. Help us not to give up on ourselves, on others or on you. Steer us, and those we love, through the rough seas and the calm waters of life, and may your good purposes be worked out through our lives and in your world, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

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