

The story of Joseph Part 2: Joseph and Potiphar's wife by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 9th August 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **Genesis 39**, Psalm 119:33-40, Matthew 5:27-30

Introduction

Today's sermon is number 2 in a series of 3 on the life of Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob. The story of Joseph takes up 14 of the 50 chapters of Genesis. It's not only a beautiful and well-written tale, but it also plays a really important part in the story of the people of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. And so it's the story not only of the fortunes of one man, but also of the eternal purposes of God.

Joseph's story, of course, has become well-known through the musical by Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice, and I expect all of us could sing one or two of the songs from the show at a moment's notice. But don't think that you know Joseph until you have read the story for yourself in Genesis. It's full of subtleties and important lessons for our lives.

The story so far

Last week we saw the 17-year-old Joseph getting into trouble as a result of a combination of poor parenting by his father and Joseph's own teenage arrogance and insensitivity. As if it wasn't bad enough for his brothers that Joseph was clearly the favourite son, given a special robe by his father, he brags about dreams he has had that show them bowing down to him. The brothers' anger bursts out when they have Joseph to themselves, far from home, and he narrowly escapes being killed. A passing caravan of traders on their way to Egypt provide the opportunity for the brothers to get rid of Joseph and earn some money, and he is sold as a slave. To explain his absence, they kill a goat, dip Joseph's beautiful robe in its blood and convince their father that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal.

Joseph the slave and Joseph the prisoner

All of this happens in the course of a few months, but the events of today's episode take place over several years. Chapter 39 sees Joseph bought by Pharaoh's official Potiphar, and working his way up to becoming the manager of Potiphar's whole estate, only to be falsely accused of attempted rape and thrown into prison. We see Joseph maturing from an arrogant teenager, to a respected and trusted adult in his mid-twenties. And even when thrown into prison, Joseph wins the trust of the prison governor and ends up being put in charge of the other prisoners. The one-time shepherd boy is destined for a career in senior management.

There are two factors that explain this transformation in Joseph's fortunes. On the human side, he clearly has not only great gifts of administration, but a character of integrity combined with an obedience to God that guides his actions. But there's

also a divine aspect to this: Both in Potiphar's house and in the prison we read that God was with him and caused all that he did to prosper¹.

Before we go on, I'd like to suggest that you take a couple of minutes to think back to when you were 17. What were you doing then, and what aspirations did you have for your life? Has the course of your life panned out as you expected? What 2 or 3 significant things have happened that shaped who you are now?

2 minutes' pause

I realise that 2 minutes is far too little to do justice to the story of your life, but I hope that you'll take some time later today to think more about the course of your life, and particularly to ask yourself, where has God been in my life? Where has he been working behind the scenes to help me, guide me and show me what he wants for my life?

From the ashes of disaster...

Genesis 39 starts off badly for Joseph, as he is sold in the slave market in Egypt. But Joseph responds to his situation positively. He does his work on Potiphar's estate conscientiously, his work and his reliability are noticed, and over the course of maybe 7-8 years he rises to become Potiphar's estate manager. It's easy to feel sorry for yourself when an unexpected reversal happens in your life, you feel out of control and maybe unjustly treated. Joseph has to face loss of liberty and becoming a slave, and it also seems that he experiences some racism, as we see in the way Potiphar's wife talks about him as "that Hebrew". But with God's help, Joseph turns a major setback into a new career. With God, nothing is wasted and there's always a chance for something new and beautiful to emerge from the ashes of disaster.

The same thing is true of Joseph's time in prison. In the last section of this chapter we see Joseph gaining the confidence of the prison governor and being entrusted pretty much with the running of the prison. On the one hand it's Joseph's attitude towards his situation that helps to turn it round. But it's also God's grace. Verse 21 says that "The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love". And the chapter ends with "whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper". As St Paul wrote, if God is on our side, who can be against us?²

Potiphar's wife

But what about this incident with Potiphar's wife? Just as everything seems to be going well for Joseph as major domo in Potiphar's house, he becomes the victim of sexual harassment. We are all too familiar with this in our society today, and of course it is usually powerful men manipulating women for their own sexual advantage. But the same process is happening in the Joseph story.

Potiphar's wife has everything she needs except, perhaps, sufficient attention from her husband, who is too busy working for Pharaoh and maybe takes her for granted. She starts noticing the young, handsome and physically well-built Joseph, and

¹ Genesis 39:3,23

² Romans 8:31

repeatedly tries to seduce him. The Bible doesn't dwell on details, but you can imagine how it develops: compliments, looks, maybe some physical touching. But there is an unequal power relationship between her and Joseph. She is the mistress of the house, he is a slave, albeit a senior one. He cannot choose to leave his job. He cannot make a complaint to his employer. The pressure from her continues day after day, and is quite explicit: "Come to bed with me". Finally, when they are in the house alone together, she tries to take off his clothes. Joseph can't risk defending himself physically against his master's wife, and he simply runs out of the house to escape, leaving his mistress with the evidence she needs to make her accusation of attempted rape: his item of clothing. This is the second time that an item of Joseph's clothing is used for the purposes of deception (remember the blood-stained robe presented to Jacob by the brothers?)

Did you notice Joseph's response when Potiphar's wife first started propositioning him? He points out that Potiphar has left everything in Joseph's care and it would be the most serious breach of his trust to have an affair with his wife. But even more important, it would be a sin against God. Joseph has the same attitude as the writer of Psalm 119, whose top priority is to follow God's ways, and prays "Turn my eyes from looking at vanities" (Psalm 119:37). He also has the same attitude as Jesus tells his followers to have with regard to sexual sin: it's better to throw away your eye than to allow it to lead you into sin.

Joseph faces this latest challenge with his usual integrity, letting his behaviour be guided by his responsibilities to Potiphar and to God. Are we as single-minded in doing the right thing, whatever the pressures upon us?

Where is God in all this?

I mentioned earlier that there were two sides of this story, the human side, shown in the character of Joseph and the way he responds to his situation, and the divine side, God making Joseph's work prosper and blessing the household of Pharaoh through him.

But what is God's plan for Joseph's life? Why did God allow him to be sold as a slave, and then to be falsely accused of a terrible crime and thrown into gaol? You'll remember, no doubt, how the story continues. Joseph interprets the dreams of 2 of Pharaoh's servants who are with him in prison. The butler is restored to his position, but forgets that he'd promised to put in a good word for Joseph until 2 years later, when Pharaoh has the disturbing dreams about cows and ears of corn.³ Only then, at the age of 30, is Joseph put in the position God had prepared him for, managing the food supplies of the whole land of Egypt, preparing for and then managing the crisis of seven years of famine.

Joseph is 37 years old when the famine begins. But God had been working behind the scenes for the past 20 years to prepare Joseph for this moment. If Joseph had not been sold as a slave he would not have been in Egypt. If Potiphar's wife had not falsely accused him he would not have been in prison to interpret the butler's

³ Genesis 41:1ff

dream, and if the butler had not forgotten about him for 2 years his skill in interpreting dreams would not have come to Pharaoh's attention precisely at the moment when Joseph's skills in managing the forthcoming crisis were most needed. And all along, through the hardships that Joseph endured, God was making a plan to save not only the people of Egypt, but the family of Jacob, who were to become the chosen people of Israel, from starvation.

We humans can often only see a small part of what is going on in the world. But God sees the big picture, and God takes the long view, and has ways of using even injustice and suffering to bring about salvation for those he loves. Joseph has no idea as he goes through his different experiences what God is up to. It is only later, when he is finally re-united with his brothers, and reflects on how the pieces of the jigsaw have fitted together, that Joseph understand God's good purpose in it all, as we shall see next week.⁴

Maybe as we go away today we can reflect on the good purposes of God in our world and in our lives. Let's bring to him in prayer the situations of suffering and hardship which we struggle to make sense of, trusting that somehow he will work things out for the best. And as we do that, let's make sure that we are people of integrity like Joseph, responding to whatever life throws at us with trust in God, and seeking to please him in every aspect of our lives, so that we, like Joseph, can be a blessing to those around us, and even to those far off whom we may never meet.

⁴ Genesis 45:5