

Joseph's stamina

Genesis 37.1-4, 12-28

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My three daughters have, in their primary school years, played roles in the musical Joseph and the Technicolour Dream Coat. Two of them even twice. We still have one of the dream coats at home. So I was always so sure that the coat of Joseph was multicoloured... Until I prepared for this sermon...

Some bible translations do indeed say that Joseph had a multicoloured coat. But the Hebrew word in Genesis is rather puzzling, and the first Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, translated that puzzling word into 'multicoloured'.

But many translations speak of a coat with long sleeves.

In any case, it was a very special coat, an expression of the excessive love of father Jacob for his son Joseph, above his other sons and daughters.



1. Joseph as Joseph

It is clear enough that this nice coat was one of the problems between Joseph and his brothers. He was being treated so much nicer than his brothers!

I think it is realistic to say that the family of Jacob and his four wives, at least four, was very dysfunctional.

Joseph is sometimes presented as a telltale; he told his father of the behaviour of his brothers. But looking at the whole story of Joseph and his brothers, he seems to be a very nice guy, faithful, honest.

It seems he had good reasons to keep his father in the loop about the behaviour of his brothers. They were immoral, murderous, incestuous types.

We will not go into those family problems now, but we should at least be encouraged that God works through and blesses even very dysfunctional families. So there is hope for us!

The account of Jacob and his children, a broken family, shows us how God achieves his gracious purposes in spite of human sinfulness and adverse circumstances.

Jacob's sons were far away with their flocks, all the way to Shechem. Jacob and the family were based in Hebron, and Shechem was far away, about 50 kilometers. Why take the flock so far for grazing?

Later in the story of Joseph we learn that the whole region went through a terrible drought and famine. Maybe there were already dry periods.

The brothers would throw Joseph in a dry well in Dothan, maybe another indication that there had been a lack of rain.



In Shechem Jacob had bought some land, long ago, so they belonged there. But it was also known in the family of Jacob as a place to avoid.

It was where a prince of the land had raped his daughter Dina, and in revenge, the sons of Jacob had killed many men in the city.

So maybe Jacob was worried about how his sons were doing there. It was a dangerous place.

So he sends Joseph to see how things are. In Shechem Joseph finds out that his brothers are 20 kilometers further up, in Dothan. Maybe it was too dangerous for them in Shechem. Or maybe the drought pushed them to look for grass elsewhere.

I seek my brothers, Joseph said. That is a good thing to do, for us as well.

But when Joseph found them, some wanted to kill him. They agreed to selling him as a slave.

Imagine how they hated him. People doing wrong find it often unbearable to be in the company of a good person.

Some Ismaelites - Arabs on camels - passed by, on their way to Egypt, and they were prepared to pay 20 shekels - 20 small silver coins - for Joseph. The price of a slave.

In the Code of Hammurabi, a famous Babylonian code of law, 20 shekels was mentioned as the going rate for slaves. But that was written hundreds of years before the story of Joseph, so the commercial rate for selling Joseph should have been higher because of inflation.

The brothers did not care. 'Please take him. We cannot stand him.'

While Joseph was seeking for his brothers, the brothers loathed him and dumped him. That is not a very Christian attitude to brothers or sisters. Even when you have good reasons not to like them.

Joseph was scared to death and begged his brothers for mercy.

We know this, because his brothers would many years later say to one another, "We saw how distressed [Joseph] was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen."

Only many years later Joseph would conclude that God used it all for good, but of course he did not see that at first. Poor Joseph, a boy of 17. He was treated so badly and had just darkness ahead of him.

2. Joseph as Jesus

Joseph being so distressed and begging for his life does remind me of Jesus in Gethsemane, who “began to be sorrowful and troubled” and He pleaded with God over and over again that his life would be spared, God willing.

But as in the story of Joseph, out of the misery of our Lord Jesus Christ came a glorious end, or rather, a new beginning.

His cross led to the crown, for himself and for millions of people.

The church had always seen in the story of Joseph a typology of the life of Jesus.

Around the year 200, church father Tertullian wrote:

“Joseph [was] a figure of Christ in [...] that he suffered persecution at the hands of his brethren, and was sold into Egypt. [Just as] Christ was sold by Israel- and therefore, ‘according to the flesh,’ by his ‘brethren’ - when he was betrayed by Judas.”

And St Ambrose, bishop of Milan, pointed at how the brothers of Joseph joked about his dreams and challenged him in that regard.

But according to Ambrose, “It is fulfilled in regard to Christ, when the Jews said in the course of his passion, ‘If he is the King of Israel, let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusts in God; let him deliver him now, if he wants him.’”



Joseph was seeking his brothers, just and Jesus came to save his brothers.

Joseph was the beloved child of his father, persecuted by his own brothers, sold for 20 pieces of silver. Well, Jesus for 30 shekels, there was some inflation.

Like Joseph, Jesus was stripped of his tunic.

Joseph was assumed dead, but eventually he was alive and he saved the world and his own brothers.

And they worshipped him, as Joseph had dreamt at the beginning of his life. It is easy to see the parallels with Jesus and his life, death and resurrection.

The church has always read the Old Testament with this question in mind: What does it tell us of Jesus and the church.

This made the Old Testament an open book for the church - not just ancient history, not only preparation for the New Testament.

In the Old Testament we meet our God and we learn how to live.

How can it be that we learn from such an old book, and how come that the stories in the Old Testament in many respects reflect Jesus Christ who came much later?

This is, I believe, because in the lives of those people long ago, God was at work. In fact as Christians we believe that Jesus Christ was at work, even in the Old Testament.

Through Him, God created the world. Through Him, God acted in our world.

And God is always the same, consistent, to be trusted. How God works in the life of Joseph, is not radically different from how he works in St Paul, or Moses, or John the Baptist.

Because all people in the Bible have their vertical link with the same God, if you compare those people in their relationship with God, you notice many similarities in their lives.

Jesus Christ is God incarnate. In Him we see truly who God is. And God, in his dealings with people, in the Old Testament and the New Testament, is always true to Himself.

Jesus is the most perfect expression of God. But the nature of God is also expressed in how he deals with all those people in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

3. Joseph as you

I know, I am a bit philosophical, but this is important. Because it is the exact reason why we can feel related to our brother Joseph, and we can learn from him. Even though he lived 3700 years ago.

We can learn from him, because we know that our God deals with us, in spite of our different circumstances, in principle in the same way.

We will not go through the same life experiences as Joseph. But what God did in his life, will not be so different from how He works in your life,

For us this life story of Joseph is an important lesson. Joseph said: "I seek my brothers." That is what Jesus did, and that should be our life motto. To help people, support people, to help other people on their way with Jesus Christ.



But this serving of God and of other people can be very disappointing at times. Joseph sought his brothers but his brothers rejected him, as Jesus was rejected. And as we may at times feel rejected by the people who are closest to us. And that is very hard.

We may feel so miserable and unable to see the light and understand what's going on. You may feel as if your dreams are all shattered. Joseph and us, we are a team are we not?

Joseph cried out for help, and it did not come. Thank God, at least he was not killed, but he was taken away as a slave, and he lost his family.

But Joseph was resilient. His story is a story of not giving up. Almost killed, thrown in the pit, sold as a slave, tempted by Potiphar's wife, put in prison, tempted to take revenge on his brothers...

But he remained strong and faithful. And by doing this, he saved his brothers, even his father from starvation.

And we can learn from this.

When things go south in our life, we need to be resilient. And even when things look grim, let us not lose our focus on loving God and serving other people.

People who in their difficult times are still able to think of the welfare of others, are beautiful people.

Do not underestimate your ability to continue, even when circumstances are grim. Your ability to serve others, even when your own life is not that easy.

Joseph had a dream early on in his life; dreams were seen as messages from God. His dream and the belief that God had spoken through it, kept him going.

It is strange that the people who put our lectionary together left out the part of the dream. Because that is what gave Joseph his faith, his stamina, his hope.

Conclusion

We have Jesus Christ who has spoken to us. "Go into the world and I am with you always. Wherever you are." This empowers us to be people of hope.

Even when in the pit. Even when we feel that we are shackled to problems.

Never underestimate God - how He uses all your circumstances and misery to build a better you and a better future.

He builds a better you through what happens to you - but then you must in those hard moment, like Joseph, hold fast to what God has spoken to you. "Love God, love all people. And I am with you..."

Hold on to your faith in God, the good God, who uses all things in your life as building blocks for the better person that you will be tomorrow.

And that tomorrow even extends over the border of life and death. He will never forsake you. This is our God, the God of Joseph, the God of Jesus, your God.

+Amen.