

Genesis 45:1-20

Romans 8:28-39

Matthew 18:21-22

God in difficult times

Last week we left Abraham gazing at the stars as he pondered both God's call for him to follow and God's promise to him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. In time the promise of descendants came true - he had a son Isaac. But the story today is not about Isaac, its not about the perplexing incident of Abraham being asked by God to be prepared to sacrifice his son which may well be about us trying to hold on to things (and people) too closely. It's not about Isaac's twins Esau and Jacob. Not about Jacob tricking his brother out of what was rightfully his – the birthright. Its not about Jacob himself being tricked by his father-in-law which resulted in him having to marry Laban's eldest daughter Leah before he could marry the younger one – Rachel – who he loved. Nor is it directly about Jacob favouring Rachel and her two children – Joseph and Benjamin - over the rest of his large family, though it is about the chaos and mess that followed on from that.

Jacob, you may well recall, had 12 sons by his two wives and two slave girls. The two he loved the most were the two born of his beloved Rachel – Joseph and Benjamin.

Joseph was a dreamer – and had dreams which he boldly interpreted to his brothers to be about them and his parents bowing down to him and worshipping him, much to their chagrin. Joseph was spoilt by his father, he was spared the hard work and given sometimes lavish gifts. So its really not surprising that his brothers began to resent him.

The story looks at how a family rift turns sour. How the older sons of Jacob turned on Joseph when he came to them miles from anywhere; how they wanted to kill him, but later decided to sell him as a slave. They went back to Jacob with Josephs coat soaked in blood and said they assumed he had been attacked and killed by a wild animal.

The story moves to focus on Joseph. How he was taken to faraway Egypt and sold as a slave to a high ranking official. How the official's wife took a shine to him and tried to seduce him, and how Josephs refusal to accept her advances led to him being accused of making advances to her. He was thrown into prison. It seemed that life couldn't get any worse. Miles from home; a slave in a prison cell. Seemingly no hope and no future.

But while he was in prison he interpreted the dream of a fellow prisoner, and in time his gift of interpreting dreams became known to the Pharaoh – the king of Egypt. Pharaoh had had a dream which Joseph managed to interpret. It was about a coming famine that would affect the whole land, and the need to prepare for it.

Pharaoh was so impressed that he put Joseph in charge of the nation – effectively prime minister – and had him oversee the preparations for the famine years and the supply of food during them. Joseph became rich and influential. How things can change.

But then we hear that the famine had reached Canaan, and that Jacob and his family were suffering from its effects. They heard that there was grain in Egypt and Jacob sent his sons to buy some.

The brothers (all except Benjamin who had now taken Joseph's place as Jacob's favourite and remained at home with his father) came to Egypt to buy grain. They found themselves in the presence of Joseph, but they did not recognise him, even though Joseph recognised them straight away. Joseph accused them of being spies, and insisted they brought their youngest brother to prove their innocence. Simeon was held as a hostage while they went back to Canaan with the grain.

Jacob was distraught. His family was disintegrating before his eyes. He didn't want to lose Benjamin as well, but eventually hunger forced him to allow the sons to take Benjamin and head off to Egypt. When they got there Joseph almost toyed with them, sending them back but placing valuables in Benjamin's sack and then accusing him of theft.

Eventually Joseph could control himself no more, and that's where we joined the story with today's reading. Joseph reveals himself to his brothers; they are even more worried than before. What would he do to them in revenge for what they did to him? Had they moved from a famine crisis to a family crisis? Would they emerge from all this alive?

But Joseph offers them forgiveness and shows an understanding that God is able to bring good things from bad. The family all move from Canaan to Egypt, and are given land to call home by Pharaoh.

Of course these stories are in the Bible to tell us of the history of the nation of Israel. How the nation was God's chosen people and how they lived out that calling.

But they are also included to show us something of how God deals with his people, and how God wants his people to behave. Timeless lessons as much applicable today as they were thousands of years ago. Lessons which address issues we come across in everyday life. Disputes, the need to forgive, how we cope with bad times, how we can trust in God when things are not going well.

There will always be disputes and disagreements – I suppose its all part of being human. We don't always see eye to eye. I was reading in the newspaper about the civil war in Ethiopia. I mentioned last week our visit there a few years ago. In the paper was news of the war reaching a place called Lalibela – a town which we visited and where we stayed for a night. People we met and had conversations with are now caught up in spiralling violence and war. Surely there is a better way of settling disputes than resorting to violence.

Joseph had been mistreated. Virtually left for dead by his own brothers. And yet his reaction was not to retaliate or seek revenge. His thought, because of his knowledge of God and trust in God, was to seek friendship and reconciliation – to forgive. This takes enormous courage. Perhaps more courage than retaliation. To be prepared to leave the past in the past and look to the future. To be prepared to forgive others as God forgives us.

The story of Joseph forgiving his brothers for the evil they did reminds me of something I read about Corrie Ten Boom. Corrie – a Christian - lived in Holland in the war years and her family helped Jewish people escape from the Nazis – sheltering them in their own house. After a while Corrie and her family were caught and sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp. She later wrote a book about how her faith helped her survive. She talks of speaking of her experiences at a meeting after the war and how she saw in the audience a guard she recognised from the concentration camp where she had been held, and where her sister had been killed. Corrie was speaking about the need to forgive. And right now the theory and the practice were coming together. What should she do.

The ex guard clearly recognised her too. He had become a Christian since the war and was sure of God's forgiveness. But he needed forgiveness from her. He asked her - Would she forgive him?

Corrie talks of the immense and superhuman effort required to say the words "I forgive you". Words that she couldn't say with her own strength, but words that could only come from God. Words that opened the door to a better future, rather than proliferating the hatred and mistrust.

But what about us? Are there times when we have been hurt and we have been challenged to forgive someone? I once heard a sermon which spoke about the way forgiving someone frees us from the anger and hurt which hold us back; it enables us to start living again rather than being bound by the past. But it is not easy. I spoke at the Thursday morning service this week about how sometimes the best we can do is to want to forgive someone, or even to want to want to forgive someone. God through his Spirit will help us take things further – as he did for Corrie Ten Boom.

But Joseph can teach us something else as well. He could see the hand of God at work through all of the things he had been through. On first reading it might appear that he is saying that God had wanted these events to take place all along, but I don't believe it's as simplistic as that. Surely what Joseph is saying is that no matter what kind of mess we make of things, God can always bring good things from it. And maybe that chimes with your life.

Perhaps in these last 18 months you can see how God has used them to allow good things to flourish. Maybe you can see things in your life; I can certainly see things in our church life. None of this says that God willed the pandemic, merely that God can and does work through bad things.

And in our own lives, it's often said that we grow more – in knowledge of ourselves, the world and God – through difficult times than through the easier times. I can relate to that. God working through the bad times to bring good.

God is always in the business of bringing good from bad. Follow the story on and we will find that the settling down in Egypt didn't turn out as well as it started. The nation of Israel – Jacob's descendants – became the ones the Egyptians blamed for all their troubles. Life became hard for them; they were oppressed and victimised; treated like slaves. It needed God to intervene again to bring good from bad – and we will pick up that story next week when we hear of Moses leading the people from Egypt to the promised land. From oppression to freedom. From death to life.

As we continue our journey through the Bible, we will see that even in the Old Testament – sometimes stories and incidents that seem bizarre and alien to us – even there we can see parallels between the way God acted then and how he acts in our lives today.