

21st July 2019

Sermon for Evensong, 5th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament: Genesis 41: 1-16, 25-37

New Testament: 1 Corinthians 4: 8-13

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” Romans 8.28

It is one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament; turned into a musical by Andrew Lloyd Weber. A story about a young man, with an amazing technicolour dreamcoat, who is favoured by his father, beaten up by his brothers, sold into slavery, ends of in Prison in Egypt and final rescues the whole nation by interpreting dreams and becoming Pharaoh’s right-hand man.

A famous story; yet interestingly one that doesn’t appear in our Sunday readings very often, and never in its entirety. Tonight we heard just one small portion of it and the next two Sunday evenings give us a little bit more; each time we hear something of the story, but we also miss a great deal of the action. So I urge you, that one thing you could do this week, is to read the whole of the Joseph story; it’s a good one...

And it’s a good one, because so much of it is relevant for today...

The was once a young man named Joseph. Joseph was the son of Jacob, the one who had stolen his Father’s blessing from his brother Esau, and then eventually settled in Paddan Aram with 2 wives and at least women who were not his wives, but with whom he had children. And these four women had had twelve sons between them and Joseph, and his younger brother Benjamin, were born of the favourite wife, Rachel. And Jacob loved Joseph more than all the other brothers, and so he made him a special ornate robe. And when the brothers heard of this, and *saw that their favourite loved Joseph the most, the hated him and could not speak a kind word of to him*¹. And Joseph, arrogant and self-assured seventeen year old that he is, makes it even worse by telling his brothers of a dream he’s had; where the sun and the moon and the eleven stars all bow down to him...

¹ Genesis 37.3-4

And how many of us have every felt jealous of our siblings?

And so, the brothers plot of kills Joseph.

But still God was working...

And one of them, Reuben, gets cold feet; so they strip him of his special coat and throw him in a pit, and then sell him to Midianite slave traders for twenty shekels of silver and he's taken to Egypt.

And we remember that people are still being sold into slavery today; are still being trafficked across international borders to work in the households of the rich.

But still God was working...

And Joseph begins to do quite well and everything under is care flourishes and he is put in charge of the household... That is, until he is subjected to sexual exploitation, falsely accused, slandered, and thrown into prison.

But still God was working...

And even *in prison the Lord was with him*² and he found favour in the warden's eye and was given much responsibility.

And one day, a cupbearer and a baker both had dreams. And Joseph gives them God's interpretation of those dreams; that one will be restored to office and the other will receive the death penalty. And Joseph asked the cupbearer, who did indeed return to his job, to remember him.

But the cupbearer forgot. And two years later Joseph is still languishing in jail.

And still God was working...

Pharaoh has a dream....

In fact, he has two dreams. Dreams in which the Nile, that symbol of Egyptian prosperity and fertility, becomes the setting for 7 sleek and fat cows to be eaten up by 7 ugly cows; the ugliest cows that Pharaoh has ever seen...

And God is working...

² Genesis 39.21

And the cupbearer suddenly remembers Joseph, who cleans himself up and gives God's interpretation of the dreams. An interpretation that warns of a famine, that will ravage the land and will ruin them all.

Unless, says Joseph, a wise and discerning man is put in charge. A man who could oversee the operation to collect food during all the good years and distribute it in the years of shortage.

Could anyone find such a wise, discerning man, filled with the spirit of God? Asks Pharaoh..

Joseph stands a little taller.... Until Pharaoh gets the hint...

What do we do when life doesn't turn out as planned? How are the purposes of God carrying on; even when you can't see them? Unlike the Abraham story, we don't hear regular reminders that Joseph 'trusted in the Lord'. And yet, at each point, when life seemed like it was at its worst, there are cracks of light; moments of surprising grace in these dark times... God is at work, even in the bleakest moments, even when we might want to give up hope, even when our luck seems to be going from bad to worse, even when we're stripped and thrown in a pit. Regardless of what humanity is up to and even when we can't see God's purpose, God is at work.

Quite unknowingly, God has used the older brother, Reuben. And the slave traders. And Potiphar. And the prison warden. And the cupbearer. And now, God uses Pharaoh.

And why?

Is God's ultimate purpose to bring to high office an arrogant young Israelite man?

No.

God's purpose, as it always is, is to save lives. The whole narrative culminates at this point, as Joseph gives God's interpretation of the dream and then comes up with a plan. And it is a plan to save lives. To stop thousands, perhaps millions of people, from both Egypt and all the surrounding area, dying of starvation. God's intervention doesn't absolve human responsibility; but it has enabled Joseph, who has not lost his confidence and self-respect even during those years of slavery and imprisonment, to take on the leadership role to which he is called. To make quick decisions in the face of a crisis. And ultimate to save those who have might otherwise died. God's intervention never absolves us of human responsibility to step up when needed...

God is working, even when all feels lost.

When, as followers of Christ, it feels like we are the least of the least, the rubbish of the world... Even when we are hungry, persecuted, slandered, or just plain tired, God is at work...

And because we can have confidence in God's saving action..., because we have hope that God's purposes are being worked out, even in the darkest of times then, as Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth; *"When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly"*³.

*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*⁴ Let's keep that hope alive. Even when are lives are going badly. Even when we can't face turning on the TV or the radio because the news is so depression. Even when we feel like we're in despair...

Let us keep that hope alive.

Let us keep the hope alive and let us be attentive to those moments when a sudden crack of light in the darkness gives us a reminder that God is at work.

And when we see those cracks, let us step into them, and take up our responsibility to also work for God's saving purposes.

³ 1 Corinthians 4.12-13

⁴ Romans 8.28