

## Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021 – Joseph (1) ‘The Favourite’ (Genesis 37:1-11)

‘I closed my eyes, drew back the curtain (ah-ah-ah), to see for certain what I thought I knew....’ Most of you know the words – some of you at this point will be picturing a dreamy Jason Donovan crooning away, maybe even a few of you of a certain generation will be remembering the original West End star Gary Bond in the title role of the musical that has come to be associated with this famous story.

When you hear the word Joseph, it’s hard not to immediately complete the phrase ‘and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.’ The fact that this coat only appears twice in the story, is not directly connected to the dreams Joseph has, and could even be translated ‘a coat of long sleeves’ doesn’t matter – when we think of Joseph, we think of *that coat*.

What you can say about that coat is that it is deeply symbolic, and encapsulates the nature of the relationships Joseph has within his household. As we begin our 5-part series today, we look at Joseph The Favourite. Over the following weeks, we’ll recount the key episodes of Joseph’s life using other titles for him: next week The Fall Guy, then The Forgotten – the low point of Joseph’s tumultuous life. After that, the story turns with Joseph The Faithful, and finally we enjoy the reconciliation with his family in our last part, titled Joseph The Forgiver.

The story takes place over the course of about 15 years, seeing Joseph’s journey to maturity from his late teens to his early 30s, and is rightly one of our favourite bible stories, not just for its redemptive qualities but also for its insights into human nature. It is set in a real family, with all its warts and wrinkles, and has so much to teach us both about the destructive power of resentment *and* the healing power of forgiveness, the resilience of the human spirit, and **the hand of God at work in and through our lives**. Joseph is able to step back at the end and summarise to his family: ‘You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.’ (50:20)

But this wonderful reflection doesn’t detract from the fact that **this is a very human story**, with fantastic but fallible characters throughout, and which begins long before Joseph is born, in the colourful past of Joseph’s father Jacob. You may remember the story of how Jacob, who was himself his mother’s favourite, tricked his father Isaac into taking his older brother Esau’s birthright by wearing goatskin to mimic his brother’s hairy arms. Jacob was then forced to flee from his furious (and much more physically powerful) brother, and is then himself tricked by his father-in-law Laban into marrying the sister of the woman he really loved.

Both of these episodes play a part in how our story begins. **Why is Joseph the favourite son? The answer is found in his father Jacob’s own marital history**. The love of Jacob’s life was Rachel, but he was forced to marry her sister Leah first, and then found that Rachel could not have children. In all he had ten children by his three other partners until finally, his beloved Rachel bore him a son, Joseph. Tragically, Rachel then died in childbirth as she bore Benjamin, leaving Joseph as the apple of his father’s eye, the one son of his beloved Rachel who was not associated in his mind with her death.

That said, there is really no excuse for Jacob’s favouritism towards Joseph, knowing his own history, and how much trouble his mother’s manoeuvring on his behalf had caused for him. Jacob’s own trials had been defined by being the family favourite, so he really should have known better.

But we know that family life doesn't work according to abstract principles. Indeed, **the sub-title of the story of Joseph could easily be: 'How to survive a dysfunctional family'**. I wonder what you feel about yours? Would you describe your family as dysfunctional? The truth is that there is dysfunction in most families, the older I get the more I would say that it's not a case of *whether* a family is dysfunctional or not, but only *how much*: it's a sliding scale, from slightly to very dysfunctional.

That's because we are all flawed people. If the best definition of sin is selfishness, then of course every family will feel its effects. Every family has its power struggles, its dominant characters and quieter ones, its accusations of favouritism and mistreatment. Since most people spend most time with their families, then **family life intensifies all the natural problems you find in human relationships**. Most of us learn to play roles in our families, and even when we are much older will find ourselves reverting to our childhood roles when we go back home.

Some of you today will have heard the passage and instinctively finding yourself identifying with either Joseph, or the brothers, or perhaps even Jacob. This is a story which touches all of us, not least because you can see it unfolding with almost grim inevitability. First Joseph tells his father what some of his brothers were up to: remembering that this is *before* the coat and the dreams, it is likely that he felt obliged to report bad behaviour, since the flocks ultimately were owned by Jacob. But it gets things off to a bad start, which Jacob compounds with the gift of *that* coat, a sign that he was no longer expected to take part in manual labour, which probably angered the other brothers more than the gift itself.

Then come the dreams, and let's remember that while the teenage Joseph was perhaps unwise to share them so blatantly – but remember he is 17, and how many 17-year olds do you know who are tactful and diplomatic in their communication? – the fact is that these dreams come true. There is an important point here **not to dismiss possible divine nudges because we don't like what God is saying**. Verse 11 suggests that Jacob was old and humble enough to have learned this, whilst his sons had not.

And so the scene is set for the dramatic story that follows. Patterns of resentment are not dealt with and explode with catastrophic results in the next part of the story: note the repetition of the brother's feelings in verse 4, then 5, then 8, then 11. Again, **there's a lesson here in letting go of resentment, even if you might feel the resentment is merited**. No good comes of it in the end.

But let's conclude our first set of observations today by reminding ourselves that **we are part of a bigger family**. Our families will always play a huge part in defining who we are and where we start: but it's not the end of the story. Our past does not have to define our future, and in our gospel reading Jesus reminds us that those who follow him join a much bigger and more wonderful family: the family of God. We get many new brothers and sisters, and whilst this family too has its challenges, as anyone who's been part of a local church knows, this also brings a new perspective. We invite God into our relationships, and this great God is able to bring us through the difficulties of family life, whether our blood family or our spiritual family.

**God is bigger than our families** – may God speak to us through this amazing story, and may the Lord work his grace in our blood family *and* our spiritual families in this season. Amen.