

Sunday 24th October 2021 – Joseph (3) ‘The Forgotten’ (Genesis 39:19 – 40:8 & 20-23)

One of my favourite artists is George Shaw. He is not well known, largely because he has spent his entire working life painting one housing estate in Coventry, the place where he lives, called Tile Hill. He moved there in 1968: and every so often he spends a day photographing the area and then paints pictures of the photos he takes. It should be said that Tile Hill is not a particularly pretty estate: it was built after the war and has areas of real deprivation in it.

What I love about Shaw's work is how the love and attention which he gives his pictures transforms what appears to be an unremarkable place. Even derelict shops take on an almost sacramental quality. Shaw enables us to see Tile Hill with new eyes: a special place, suffused with a quiet wonder.

And Shaw reminds us that, whether it's stories or places, **perspective matters. It is always possible to view things through different lenses.** Now that it's possible to read papers online, I sometimes read the news from 2 or 3 different media sources and I'm always struck at how selective much of our modern press is. You might think you were reading about two completely different events, such is the spin that is put on the facts by papers pretending to report 'the truth': indeed it is probably only possible to piece together the real facts if you do read 2 or 3 different versions.

There's a cautionary tale for all of us here in our increasingly fractious and divided society, where cookies on the internet always point us towards others who share our same viewpoint. We can easily live in bubbles which are constantly reinforcing one narrative, oblivious to the fact that others in our community might be living with a totally different one.

But the same is true when it comes to reading biblical narrative as well. The famous story of Joseph has reached its low point today. Joseph is now the victim of repeated injustices. We've already seen last week how he was mistreated by his brothers and sold into slavery. In today's passage, Joseph is now unjustly accused of inappropriate amorous advances towards his boss' wife, which lands him in prison; and then, having done a huge favour to a fellow prisoner, the prisoner forgets to return the favour, leaving Joseph languishing in a cell.

Read like this, you might find yourself asking: how much can one person take? Joseph's life appears to be at the mercy of others' bad decisions, ones that he had little control over: his father's favouritism, his brothers' plotting, Potiphar's wife's jealous revenge and then the cupbearer's self-centred ambition. Despite his obvious gifts and his integrity he finds himself in his late-20s at what appears to be a dead end, subject to one cruel episode after another.

Yet, there is another perspective to this story, one that runs like a golden thread through it. **This is not the only way to read the story, for there is also grace, and the quiet hand of God at work.** First, God gives Joseph precious promises through his infamous dreams before disaster strikes: it is hard not to reflect that these must have carried Joseph in the dark times, even if Joseph may well have cried out to God as to why the dreams were not being fulfilled.

Second, Reuben's intervention spares Joseph's life, and Joseph is also fortunate to be sold to a good employer, who is able to spot talent and look after his slaves well. Indeed, although Potiphar is put in an impossible position by his wife's accusation, he commutes what would normally have been a death sentence to prison. We might even conclude that he had real doubts about the accusation, and pronounced the minimum punishment he could in the circumstances.

Most importantly, wherever Joseph goes, he flourishes, rising to the highest position he can under the circumstances. Chapter 39 begins by telling us that 'the Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered' under Potiphar (v2), and the same happens in prison, as we read in our passage: 'while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him: he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warder.' (vv20-21)

So Joseph is not abandoned by God. Yes, he suffers at the hand of the wrongs committed by other humans, but God is with him throughout. Indeed, not only is God with him, God causes him to prosper even within the very tough circumstances in which he finds himself.

I find this passage a great encouragement, because it tackles one of the great questions of life: where is God when life hurts? When things go wrong or others betray us? And the answer is that God is right there with us, just as he always has been.

There is a mystery to human free will, and why bad things sometimes happen in clusters at particular times to particular people. But God is with us in the flood, the fire and the storm.

God has not forgotten you. Just as God never forgot Joseph either. The cupbearer may have done, but God never did. Many years later, St Paul remarks that God is able to work 'all things for good to those who love him'. Sometimes that is *through* tough circumstances, as it was for Joseph. Sometimes that is *despite* tough circumstances. Either way, God is at work, his quiet and powerful presence carrying us through the dark and difficult times. As the 'Footprints in the Sand' poem so powerfully reminds us, and, in finishing with this quote, may its words of comfort be our hope today:

"Lord, I just don't understand why, when I need You most, You leave me." The Lord whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you – never, ever, during your trials and testings. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

Amen.