

Whose line is it anyway? Genesis 43:15-45:1

This week floods have dominated the news and I expect we all know someone who has suffered from them. Even locally, the weather has majorly interfered with the farming communities and we have seen roads and fields flooded much more than usual. A tenuous link but it leads me into thinking of all the Bible stories we were taught as children. Obviously Noah and the ark is one of them and though I have preached on Noah, I did not focus in on the flood and nor will I be necessarily be focussing in on Old Testament stories that we know well, but rather the stories that lead us to seeing Jesus throughout the scriptures, as in our 2020 vision strapline.

So where have we got to? Last week I spoke on Abraham being told to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice and then jumped to Jacob's dream of a ladder going up to heaven with angels ascending and descending it. The underlying theme was about blessings. *"Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth", he says. "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land...* After that dream, Jacob went on to have 12 sons, by four different women though he only truly loved one of them. And today we hear, through the stories of two of his sons, Joseph and Judah, the theme of blessings being continued, though in a slightly different way.

We are all aware of Joseph and his technicolour dreamcoat, so I have not included that story but I do want us to think about who he was. There is twice as much about Joseph in Genesis as there is about Abraham. Why is this? Is Joseph greater than Abraham? No, not that. But one of the reasons, I would like to suggest is because the story of Joseph leads us to think of Jesus. I have given you a handout listing many of the similarities. There is also much in the story of Joseph that redeems the earlier problems in Genesis and leaves us with a good taste in our mouth as we move into the book of Exodus.

There is a wonderful children's Bible written by Sally Lloyd Jones called the Jesus Story book Bible which concludes the story of Joseph like this: *One day God would send another Prince, a young Prince whose heart would break. Like Joseph, he would leave his home and his Father. His brothers would hate him and want him dead. He would be sold for pieces of silver. He would be punished even though he had done nothing wrong. But God would use everything that happened to this young Prince – even the bad things – to do something good: to forgive the sins of the whole world.*

This story is so familiar it's easy to overlook one of the most important things that happens in it: something that has massive implications for the future of God's people, and for their eventual king, is what happens to Joseph's brother Judah. In fact, the climactic moment of the whole book of Genesis comes when Joseph and Judah stand face to face in our reading. But first - a reminder of Judah's backstory.

It was Judah who suggested selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites rather than killing him - we do not know whether that was out of compassion or greed but, whichever it was, the end result wasn't positive. Judah seemed to be one of the ring-leaders. Then, directly after that we get this strange story of Judah and Tamar. Adrian mentioned Tamar when preaching on Advent Sunday on Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, as she is one of the five non-Jewish females in the mix. Tamar was neglected by her father in law Judah when her husband died, so she resorted to feigning prostitution to get a son by him which once again makes us question his morality. This lead though, to an admission of Judah's wickedness and hypocrisy. Was he at rockbottom? But the story also tips us off that we need to pay careful attention to Judah as we are in the middle of the Joseph story and yet the focus suddenly turns to Judah. There's at least two reasons for this.

One is the immediate contrast between Judah in Genesis 38 visiting a prostitute and Joseph in Genesis 39–41 flourishing in Potiphar's house and, in particular, refusing the overtures of his master's wife. So the lives of Joseph and Judah begin in stark contrast. But then, another reason, is to prepare us for what we see in Judah just before our reading and during it. Judah was flawed and yet, later on, when faced with a decision how to guarantee Benjamin's safety when going to Egypt, he says to his father ; *'Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever.'* He is now beginning to take his responsibilities positively. The brothers thus return to Egypt, dine in Joseph's house (where Benjamin gets five times the portions), then are sent home with more food. But they are chased by an Egyptian saying someone stole Joseph's silver cup. The cup, planted by Joseph, is found in Benjamin's pack.

And then, a small detail, but it's significant as it is not just the brothers but *"Judah and his brothers."* that return to Joseph. This is followed by the longest speech in the book of Genesis which is given by Judah, and the climax of the whole book. At the end, he says, in , *"[I] became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.'* *Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers."* Judah's speech, and readiness to sacrifice — to put himself into slavery instead of abandoning his brother — breaks the spell, so to speak: *"Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, 'Make everyone go out from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers."* (45:1)

If we read on, we hear Joseph being amazingly God-centric, something that I am trying to get across in this 2020 vision. *"God sent me before you to preserve life."* *"God sent me."* *"He made me a father to Pharaoh."* *"God has made me lord of all Egypt."* *"It was not you who sent me here, but God."* Which culminates in that well-known verse: *"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good"*

I said that this story would also be about blessings... well, Joseph, as Pharaoh's chief of staff, blessed other nations by the way he organised food during the famine. He also set in motion the opportunity for the sons of Jacob, otherwise known as Israel, to become fruitful and multiply . Be like the dust of the earth. But I want to end with the blessing that Jacob gave Judah as he was dying. He blesses all his sons and indeed we all might think that it will be from Joseph that the snake crusher, the seed and the offspring will come but actually Jacob says that the kingship in Israel will belong to Judah: *You are a lion's cub,* and then *"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."* Ever wondered why Aslan was a lion? It comes from this verse. Many theologians, including Bishop Tom Wright, see this verse as prophetic. The Joseph story is actually about the kings that will come from the line of Judah and what the future is for one king in particular, which is precisely what happened in the story of Joseph: all of the brothers come and the whole world bows down to him. Tim Mackie of the Bible Project puts it like this: *"We are supposed to walk away thinking the king coming from the line of Judah is going to have a story like Joseph's story. And that's what the author intended"*

So - to sum up... Firstly, even in evil, as we have seen throughout the book of Genesis — God is in control. Human sin and evil do not stymie his purposes, but he takes those very wrong acts and intentions and uses them to bring about his saving and good intentions for his people. And secondly, the brothers' actions were evil and yet Joseph forgave them. His heart was true to God. How many of us here might have family relationships that need repairing and forgiveness?