

Parish Church of Oxton St Saviour

Joseph Sermon Series – Sermon 5

When a couple comes to church for their wedding rehearsal, one of the questions the priest is likely to ask is whether the bride intends to wear a veil. One bride who was married here, in our parish church, just recently, was married wearing a veil which was around two metres in length. It was an amazing, beautiful piece of lacework.

Just occasionally today you still see brides walking down the aisle with part of the veil over their face. And what

happens, then, when they reach the altar steps? The bride's father, traditionally, lifts the veil before the service begins.

Why am I telling you this? Because this whole tradition of fathers unveiling their daughters before weddings is intimately connected with the story of Joseph, which we are reading together this summer.

Joseph's father, Jacob – you will remember – went to live with his uncle Laban when he was a young man, and Jacob fell in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. He worked for her for seven years, but then on their wedding day Laban tricked him. The bride arrived heavily veiled, and the couple married, but the next

morning the young man discovered that the bride had actually been Rachel's older and plainer sister, Leah. So he had to work a further seven years for the sister he loved. It's for this reason that brides even to this day do not marry with their faces veiled, which is a kind of cute, isn't it?

Only things did not work out quite so cute for Jacob. Two wives, as we've said, and twelve sons, eventually. There was a daughter also. But just two of the sons with his beloved Rachel – sons of Jacob's old age – and these two sons were Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph was his favourite, the one to whom he gave the coat of many colours. But, Genesis tells us, “when his brothers

saw that their father loved [Joseph] more than all his brothers, they hated him and would not speak peaceably with him.”

When Joseph was seventeen years old, he had dreams, famously – dreams about his family bowing down to him. And his father, now for the first time perhaps, became angry with him. “What kind of dream is this?” he asked. “Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow down to the ground before you?”

Shortly afterwards, Joseph's ten older brothers are tending their father's flock near Shechem, and Jacob sends Joseph to them. And when he meets them, they

strip him of his coat, and threw him in a pit, and sell him into slavery.

Joseph must have felt truly awful at this point in his life. No future, no freedom. But the worst thing must have been the betrayal by his brothers. Or maybe there was something even worse – the betrayal by his father, Jacob.

We know, of course, that Jacob was innocent – we know that Joseph's brothers had to concoct some story about Joseph having been killed, and that his father Jacob was heartbroken, inconsolable, at his loss. But Joseph does not know this. All he knows is that his

father was angry with him, and sent him to his brothers, and his brothers sold him, cast him out of the family.

It was not like this was the first time someone had been cast out of the family, either. Jacob himself had been cast out when his father Isaac became angry with him – that's how he had ended up in the house of his uncle Laban. And in the previous generation too, his great uncle Ishmael had been cast out by his father Abraham. Surely, now, Joseph must have thought, his father had cast him out too.ⁱ

Well, Joseph ends up a slave in Egypt, in the service of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. So it was that when he fell out of favour with Potiphar, he ended up in

prison. There he languished for two whole years, until Pharaoh also began to dream. Pharaoh's dreams disturbed him, and he became determined to find someone who could interpret them for him. He found no-one up to the task, until someone who had met Joseph in prison said that he could tell the meaning of dreams.

Now begins the most remarkable pattern of events. Pharaoh had Joseph brought up out of the dungeon – though the Hebrew text calls it the pit. Then a new coat, it says, a new outer garment is placed on him, and he is brought to Pharaoh, and when he comes to

Pharaoh, Pharaoh is keen to speak with him about dreams and their interpretation.

Now the remarkable thing – did you notice it? – the remarkable thing is that this is a reversal, an undoing, of all the horrible things which had happened to Joseph at the start of the story. Pharaoh insists on speaking with Joseph about dreams; his father Jacob refused to speak about his dreams. Pharaoh brings Joseph to him; Jacob sent Joseph away. Pharaoh has a coatⁱⁱ placed on Joseph; his brothers stripped him of his coat. Pharaoh has him brought up out of a pit; his brothers threw him into a pit. Pharaoh indeed becomes a new adoptive father for Joseph – placing him in authority in his house and his

kingdom, finding him a wife. These are the things a father does for his son in Joseph's time.ⁱⁱⁱ

Joseph uses his power wisely, storing up Egypt's grain in preparation for the famine to come. Only Egypt is prepared. And so when the famine comes, Jacob sends ten of his remaining sons to Egypt to buy grain that they might avoid starving to death. Benjamin alone remains with his father.

So far we have been on Joseph's side, rooting for him. But now, as we read on, it seems that Joseph plays a series of mean tricks on his brothers. He falsely accuses them of being spies and puts them in jail for three days. Then he takes one of them as hostage, and insists that

they return with Benjamin. And when they do, at length, return with Benjamin, he plants false evidence on Benjamin (as we heard this morning) and has him taken into custody. What is all this about?

A number of theories have been written about this, explaining Joseph's actions – really, explaining them away. But I'd like to suggest to you that there's no need to explain away Joseph's actions. What he does is very simple and entirely noble. Joseph feels that he has been cruelly cast out of the family by his father and his half-brothers. Joseph feels that only his baby brother, Rachel's only other child, Benjamin, has been innocent – for Benjamin had been but a child when Joseph was sold

into slavery. And now Joseph wants to save Benjamin from the grasp of his wicked family. All the tricks are really about separating Benjamin from his family and bringing him to safety in Egypt.^{iv}

Except that, right at the last moment, as we heard this morning, Joseph's half-brothers refuse to be separated from Benjamin when he is placed under arrest. And then we have that powerful speech from Judah. And it's during this speech that the scales fall from Joseph's eyes.

Firstly, he sees that Judah has changed. Judah, who in anger had callously sold Joseph into slavery, now offers himself to save his father's new favourite, Benjamin. But secondly, as he listens to Judah's speech, he discovers

that his father had not betrayed him after all. Judah recounts to Joseph: "Then my father said to us: 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me, and I said, 'Surely he has been torn to pieces'. If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my grey hairs in sorrow to Sheol.'"

So it is that Joseph, seeing that that his brothers are changed men, but even more important, seeing that his father had been innocent of his betrayal, Joseph breaks down and reveals himself. His first thought is to ask after his father. "I am Joseph," he says. "Is my father still well?"

It's easy to read this-morning's reading as the moment when Joseph is revealed to his brothers. But really it's the moment when Jacob is revealed. It's the moment Joseph realises that he has misjudged his father. And it's the moment, too, when Judah is revealed. It's the moment when it becomes clear to Joseph – and maybe to Judah too – that Judah has repented, that he has changed.

What was true for Joseph and his family is true for us too. Even when we feel we ought to give up on a situation, or on someone else, or on ourselves, there is always more for us to see. God isn't finished with any of us yet, and so we ought not to give up on anyone

either. That can be a truly difficult message to hear when we are hurt or our life has been damaged. But it is the message our reading brings to us today.

Some Questions

1. Do you feel that it's plausible that Joseph blamed his father for the terrible things that had happened to him? Or do you think that Joseph knew all along that his father loved him?
2. It was only a six day journey from Egypt to Canaan. Why do you feel that Joseph didn't get in touch to tell his father he was safe? Why didn't he? Should he have?
3. The sermon suggests that Joseph's apparently "mean tricks" towards his brothers were really all an attempt to rescue Benjamin from their grasp. Do you feel this is right? Another theory says that

Joseph was punishing them, by inflicting on them the bad things which he had suffered as a result of their betrayal. Does that seem more plausible to you? Do you feel Joseph might have been acting with mixed motives?

4. By the end of the story, Judah and his brothers were able to risk all for the sake of Benjamin, despite the fact that he was their father's new favourite. Contrast this with the way they treated Joseph at the start of the story. What must have changed inside them to allow such a dramatic change in their behaviour?
5. Joseph learns in the end that his brothers have changed. The sermon suggests also that he learned too that his father had not betrayed him. Joseph was able to learn these things only because he was willing to risk giving them another chance. (He might, after all, have dismissed Judah's speech and had them thrown out.) How hard is it to give people another chance when they have hurt us?

Why is it hard? (Or why do you find it easy?) Is it easy to give ourselves another chance when we've messed up – or are we more inclined to give up on ourselves and decide that we're no good at something?

ⁱ Bin-Nun, Yoel, *A Tragic Misunderstanding Why Did Joseph Not Send Word to His Father*, Ein Tzurim: Yeshivat Hakibbutz Hadati, 2002 (trans. Dov Lappin); see also Sacks, Jonathan, *Covenant and Conversation*, Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009: 315-322, and Goldin, Shmuel, *Bereshit*, Jerusalem: Gefen, 2007: 244f.

ⁱⁱ Wenham, Gordon J., *Genesis 16-50 Volume 2*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 392.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fohrman, David, *Miketz: Reversing the Sale of Joseph*, Aleph Beta Academy, 2015.

^{iv} Ramban, 42:9, quoted in Bin-Nun, *op.cit.*