

GENESIS 41
TELLING IT LIKE IT IS!

Troubled – is that a word that you would use to describe someone you know? Maybe it is a member of your family, maybe it is a friend; maybe you would use that word to describe yourself! There are people you ask “how are you?” and they tell you they’re fine, but actually the reality is quite different; on the outside they look fine, but scratch the surface just a little and everything begins to pour out! Parents who are trying to bring up their children well and making choices about the way to bring up children, but they are troubled – “are we making the right choices?” The children are rebelling, or are finding life hard and parents are troubled. The young man who is very angry with life: much of the time he is fine, but when things go wrong, his reaction is to blow up in anger, then he hates himself for doing it and wishes he could be different; he is troubled by himself. The person who is ill and is waiting for tests and diagnoses and is troubled by the thought of what it might be, fearing the worst and these fears are somewhat overwhelming. The Church member who is anxious about the future of their Church; they see the spiral of decline and know that they have tried everything they know, but nothing has altered that spiral and now they are not sure that anything can. All kinds of people, all kinds of situations – the impact of many of them can be described as “troubling”.

What happens when your friend starts to talk to you about what troubles them? How do you react? It’s fascinating to see: this happens in so many ways and in so many places: you chat over the garden fence and out comes a situation that is bothering them and they are talking to you about it, looking for help! Or over coffee! Or over a meal! Or in the pub! Or walking the dog together! – wherever it is that you meet family and friends. How does it feel when the conversation turns in that direction? Do you want the ground to open up and swallow you because feel out of your depth? Are you frightened to open your mouth in case you say the wrong thing? You are concerned for your friend, but you are not sure how to express that concern, so you say nothing? Or can you use your experience of life, your Christian faith, your wisdom and grace to share something of what Jesus can do to help? Your friend has unburdened themselves on you and that will have been good to do; can we point them to Jesus who has helped us?

The man at the centre of our story in Genesis 41 today is “troubled” – *“In the...”* (Genesis 41:8) He has had two dreams, as we said earlier. In dreams anything can happen; the rules of reality are thrown out. He has these two dreams about seven cows and seven cows and seven heads of grain and seven heads of grain and he is troubled. He is troubled because he senses that these dreams mean something, but he doesn’t know what that something is; he is afraid that there is something important here that he might miss; he is afraid that that the something important might just be a hard time for him and for his people. He is troubled and he wants to find an answer. He is more troubled because the people he expects to know the answer can’t tell him: *“So he...”* (Genesis 41:8b) These people, with all their books and wisdom can’t give him an answer; they can’t settle his mind; he is still troubled. Will no-one be able to help?

Then the cup-bearer remembers Joseph. He told the story of Joseph in prison and of the day when the cupbearer and the baker, both thrown into prison by Pharaoh, both had dreams and both told their dreams to their Hebrew fellow-prisoner. He told Pharaoh about the young man who explained what their dreams meant and even more, that things had worked out just as he said. *“I was...”* (Genesis 41:13) Pharaoh gets Joseph out of prison. I wonder how Joseph felt? Did he even know he was going to be free? Thirteen years after his dreams, after a long time in prison, two years after the cupbearer left, he is thirty years old now, wiser, a more gracious man, a man whose

faith has been tested and strengthened in crucible of prison and hard times, has this chance to speak to Pharaoh about his faith and about his God. “*God will...*” (*Genesis 41:16*) “*God has...*” (*Genesis 41:25*) “*the matter...*” (*Genesis 41:32*) What an opportunity for God to be at work in one of the most powerful palaces on the planet at the time.

Two things happened: first of all, Pharaoh’s mind was settled; he accepted what Joseph said, decided he was right and saw his dreams as the future. He accepted that there would be seven good years and seven years of famine, that this was the future that God was revealing to him and he took that and his mind was settled. Secondly, he said “we need a man to look after things” “*Let Ph...*” (*Genesis 41:33*) He needed to find someone who will make sure that food is stored in the good years and someone who then is able to help people with food when the famine comes. Of course, Pharaoh decides that Joseph is that man and gives him the job of being the second most important man in Egypt after Pharaoh, with power and authority to do whatever it takes to make sure that Egypt survives the famine. Joseph’s greatness is assured from this moment on and he becomes “the man” in Egypt.

This is quite extraordinary. I’ve been trying to find words to describe Pharaoh and I’m not sure that I’ve got it right! Pagan? Powerful? It was a time of change in Egypt and their leadership is more open to other influences. Four hundred years later, Pharaoh is very different and turns the Hebrews into slaves! It is remarkable that God is at work in the Egyptian palace and in the mind and heart of this pagan king. Pharaoh is not a man of faith in the God of Israel; Pharaoh is a king with a very different value-system, a very different religion, but God is at work in this man’s mind to show him what will happen! Grace is at work there to show him the future so that the world can be saved from the full effects of famine.

Where is God at work? Where do we find grace? Who is grace for? The remarkable thing is that God is work in the hearts and minds of people that we just don’t expect. What is it that makes someone who has no experience of Church, want to know if Church and faith are good things? This is evidence of the Spirit of God at work! Only as the Spirit works in people’s hearts and minds are people prompted and inspired to ask these questions. If we think that God is only at work in church-people, people who have Christian faith, then we have a much too narrow view of the way in which God works and the people for whom God’s grace is available. God can be at work in people who are troubled, about whom we spoke at beginning; God can be at work in all kinds of people in all kinds of places. Paul describes the world to Timothy in his second letter: before the piece we read he tells his young friend that “*people will...*” (*2 Timothy 3:2-5*) and goes on to say that “*Everyone who...*” (*3:12f*) It is not a happy picture of the world for the young Christian to read. But that is the world we know and recognise still. But here’s the thing: this is the world in which God is still at work. People’s minds are still troubled and God is still at work leading people to find peace and grace. If God is not at work, we have no hope; but God is still at work in our messy world, in a world that sometimes seems to want to throw Him away.

The challenge for us in our world is to tell people about Jesus. When Joseph was cleaned up and brought into the throne-room of the Palace, what was he thinking? Was there panic in his heart? The gallus teenager had gone, so he is more circumspect perhaps? There was a danger of getting this wrong. Yet, when the question was put to him, he very clearly and simply shared his faith. “I can’t do this, but God can! I don’t know the answers, but God will show you!” Very clearly and very simply he shared his faith. “God has shown you what is going to happen...” It must have set his pulse racing to do that. But with his heart in his mouth, he shared, simply, wisely, full of grace, a very simple message to Pharaoh: “God has shown you what is going to happen.”

Pharaoh listened and believed Joseph and his troubled mind was settled by what he heard. God is at work and Pharaoh is blessed by Joseph sharing his faith.

When your friend tells you about the things that trouble them, what do you do? Is this an opportunity to share your faith, to bring God's grace into a troubled situation so that the grace and peace of God can settle the mind and heart of your friend? What has your experience of life taught you about God's grace? What have you read in the Bible that has taught you something important about life and the grace of God? Is there something that you know, that you believe, that can help your troubled friend find peace? Maybe that's the very thing that your friend needs to hear and maybe by you sharing your faith, God is at work to bring peace and grace to a troubled heart. It is scary; it's heart-in-mouth time; panic spreads through our hearts when we realise that this is what we need to do! But here is an opportunity to share something simple from your experience, from your faith, that will help someone else.

Paul has some advice for Timothy, the young preacher. Remember how he has described the messy world in which Timothy will exercise ministry, the unpromising world where there are lots of things wrong and Christians are persecuted. In that world, Timothy is being encouraged to share his faith, in his case through his preaching ministry. "*preach the...*" (2 Tim 4:2) "Telling it like it is" is both a good thing, because we tell people the stories of Jesus and of grace; it can also be a hard thing because people may not want to hear what we have to say. "In season and out of season" simply means that we are to be ready to share our faith when it is convenient for us and when it may be inconvenient for us. We are called to share our faith with other people; the results of that lie with God, the Spirit at work in the hearts and minds of others by the words that we speak; troubled hearts and minds are settled.

The king is troubled; his dreams have left him with questions, and he needs to find answers. Joseph shares his faith, simply, wisely, full of grace. "God has shown you what will happen." The king's mind is settled and he believes. His heart pounding, his palms sweating, his knees knocking, Joseph has shared his faith; Joseph has brought something of God's grace into the pagan king's palace. People we know are troubled by all kinds of experiences in life; behind the façade of being "fine" there is so often a web of troubled hearts and minds. Can we share our faith? Can we share our experience of life, grace, faith? Can we share it wisely and full of gentleness, patience and grace? Can we share it simply, without fuss, naturally as part of our conversation? We will be constantly surprised by the people and the places where we discover God is at work!