

JOSEPH – GOD WITH HIM EVERYWHERE
GENESIS 37-50

Hopes – we all have them! Children at school have their hopes – “what I want to be when I grow up!” Young people making their way in the world, at college, university, or in the world of work – “what I want to make of myself”. Parents have hopes for family life, based at times on some idealised picture that we find somewhere, but we hope “this is what I want my family life to be like” and aspire to that; that includes hopes for our children and then later our grandchildren; perhaps the baptism of a child focuses our minds on these hopes in a faith direction. We have hopes at work, ambitions, promotions, fulfilling our potential, being most that we can be. We have hopes in our hobbies – to win the next golf medal, to represent the region at bowls, to win the prize for flower-arranging. We have hopes even about the kind of people we want to be, aspire to Christian faith and a stronger faith; aspire to serve God wholeheartedly and how wonderful it will be when we see God’s blessing rest upon our lives or the lives of people we know.

Life is not always like that! These hopes can be dashed and that’s painful. The economic world in which we live today has dashed (at least temporarily) the hopes of so many young people; jobs are not easy to come by and certainly not the jobs that some of them want! Family life is so often a place of stress and strain, with parents busy taking their children to one activity after another to keep them amused. So many people, even those who thought they were in secure job, have discovered the pain of redundancy and all that means. Christian faith has become a struggle for many, being much more difficult to sustain than they ever imagined and the kind of life we have, with its frustrations and disappointments, simply adds to that sense of struggle.

By contrast, what a great life Joseph had! It was turned into a musical and all this talk about his amazing, technicolour dreamcoat. It is a story full of dreams and ambitions and these dreams came true and they all lived happily ever after. Well, it was not quite like that really! In fact, Joseph’s life is much more like the real world in which we live and the real life that we know; in the face of that real life and the struggles that he faced, he believed and trusted God. How can we sustain Christian faith in a hard world? In a world where hopes and aspirations are frustrated, even dashed? In a world where things don’t always go according to plan? In a world where people make fun of us for our Christian faith? Joseph’s story has something to teach us.

There are four strands to Joseph’s story:

- **his dysfunctional family** – how many family traits did you recognise from our reading from Genesis 37? Tale-telling – Joseph was a clype; he kept telling tales on his brothers; he told his dad what they were doing and how bad they were. Favouritism – Joseph was his dad’s favourite; he loved him above all the rest of his children, and that’s always a dangerous thing to do; he not only loved him more but he showed that he loved him better by giving him the special coat; how Joseph revelled in it. Jealousy – his brothers knew they were second-best and were not happy. Hatred – there are no kind words there; it was made worse when God gave Joseph two dreams that he would one day be a great ruler and his brothers would bow down to him; Joseph boasted and they hated him all more, so much so that they planned to kill him. Here is a family falling apart; this is no happy family unit; it is a family riven by so many bad attitudes. Joseph contributed to that; it was not everyone else’s fault!

- **Slavery** – his brothers saw their chance and sold him. It still happens in our world; there are places where people see the chance to earn some money so they sell a family member as a slave, usually in the sex-trade! The brothers sold Joseph as a slave and he is taken to Egypt and sold in the market; he is bought by Potiphar, the captain of the guard and is given charge of his house and things go well for a time. Then the bored lady of the house took a fancy to Joseph and tried to get him into her bed, but he ran. He is a slave, so his side of the story didn't count and he ended up in prison!
- **Prison** – was this house arrest in the basement of Potiphar's house? He is soon joined by two other men, the king's winetaster and his baker; they had angered the king and he had thrown them into prison and Joseph is the servant of prisoners; it doesn't get much lower down the ladder than that. He's on the bottom rung, even if he's on the ladder at all. These men each had a dream; Joseph told them what their dreams meant – would that be his ticket out of there? Well, yes; but no! The winetaster forgot about him!
- **Lord of Egypt** – finally, the king dreams of cattle and wheat, he dreams of the future but his is troubled because he doesn't understand. Eventually the winetaster remembers Joseph and up out of prison he comes to tell the king that he has dreamt about good harvests and famine and that needs to store up good crops to tide them over the famine. Joseph is given the job; he is lord of Egypt, second only to the King himself. His dreams have come true; he is reconciled with his brothers; his family come to live in Egypt where there is food to eat!

There is a thread that runs all the way through the story: *"The Lord..."* (39:2) It is a very simple thread, but one that shapes the whole story, that shapes Joseph's whole life. Everywhere Joseph went, God was with him. We say that quite simply, but remember what we've just been talking about. In the dysfunctional family where all this tale-telling, favouritism, jealousy and hatred goes on, God was there; God was at work; the dreams were God's way of being at work in young Joseph and it was not God's fault that Joseph used these dreams badly with his brothers. When he was a slave, God was with Joseph and in fact, Joseph was a good slave, inspired by his faith and his sense of God's presence. In the dark time that was prison and in all his fears, and frustrations, and the dark days of his soul that must have been part of prison ("I'll never get out of here!"), God was there with him. When he sat on the throne next to the king and basked in all the glory that was lavished upon him and the power that he had to control other people, even there God was with him and Joseph had a sense that the pattern of his life had somehow been in God's hands all along. *"God intended..."* (50:20) God was there with him every step of the way.

I wrote a piece for the latest edition of *Church News*. I had come across a group in the USA called the Mosaic Network. This is a Christian group that takes its name from the art-form that makes pictures out of lots of broken bits of tiles. The mosaic is made up of lots of little broken bits and you only see the picture when you stand back. "The name of our community comes from the diversity of our members and from the symbolism of a broken and fragmented humanity which can become a work of beauty under the artful hands of God." I contrasted that with the story of a woman whose life had been difficult, her marriage had broken up and she had been divorced and at that time she felt that Church was not for people like her; the words I used were not her words, but to me she felt "too broken to belong". We do feel that God is only interested in lives that are sorted; that God is with us when we're good or when we've got everything in the right place, or that God is with us only when we're in Church.

God is with us always and everywhere. God sees us in all the circumstances of our lives. That can be a two-edged sword because that can be comforting – God seeing us in our struggles and difficulties and being there to comfort, help and strengthen us – but it can also leave us feeling challenged because God sees us in our mistakes, our faults, the frailties of life, He sees us as we are, warts and all and we're not always too keen on that idea. Jesus is called Immanuel which means "*God with us*" or as the prologue to John's gospel puts it: "*the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.*" (*Jn 1:14 – The Message*) God in our neighbourhood? In our street? In our relationships? In our workplace? In our Church life? In our family life, good or bad? That sense of God's presence sustained Joseph all through his life; he learned to trust God, he learned faith, he learned that God would give him the strength to deal with difficult things; he learned to trust God no matter what was going on around about him.

How do we deal with life when it's hard? The Bible has a consistent answer: get a bigger view of God! It doesn't tell us to pull up our socks, or to look inside ourselves for strength; over and over again, the way to deal with hard things in life is to have a bigger and better notion of God. Today, that means learning to see that God is with us always and everywhere. How do we develop this sense of God's presence? God is there, but we don't see Him; God is there, but we don't realise it, or understand that reality. There are times when we don't want to see that reality and we have to come to terms with that. There is a famous little book called *The Practice of the presence of God* written by Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century soldier who became a monk; he spent much of his life working in the kitchens, cooking and washing dishes; his faith helped him develop the sense that God was with him in all of his life, in the mundane tasks of the kitchen as well as in prayer and worship; everything he did, he learned to do out of love for God. It might be good for us to have a little reminder somewhere everyday that says "God is here; God is with me". God's grace and endless love are at work to sustain us and strengthen us; it is good for us to see that and know that; a bigger sense of God with us can give us courage and strength, can give us hope and faith.

A man was dreaming of his life, looking back over all that had happened to him. The dream was of him walking along a beach and most of the time there were two sets of footprints in the sand and he worked out that one set was his and the other set belonged to God. So God had been with him everywhere he'd gone, just as Joseph discovered. But he also saw that there were times when there was only one set of footprints and these matched up to the hard times in his life, the days when life had been at its toughest. So he complained to God: "Why was it, that just when I needed you most, you left me to struggle on by myself? There is only one set of footprints". God replied: "My child, I did not leave you or abandon you in these hard times; I was carrying you!"

It is good for us to develop a sense of God present with us. No matter how topsy-turvy we think life is, how imperfect, God is there. God is with us and loves us when our hopes and aspirations are disappointed; God is with us when our hopes and aspirations come true; God is with us wherever we go. It is good for us to develop for ourselves a sense that God is with us always and everywhere; the sense of God with him sustained Joseph when his brothers hated him and sold him as slave; when Potiphar threw him into prison and he was the servant of prisoners; when the winetaster forgot all about him; when he was broken; when he was lord of Egypt and had some tough decisions to make. God is with us always and everywhere; it is good for us to develop eyes to see that reality and hearts that take courage from it.