

Genesis 42: 1 – 25

'Joseph and his brothers'

**Prayer: 'May I speak and may we all respond in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.'**

And ... the saga continues.

In our Old Testament reading recently we've been following Joseph ... and he's been put in charge of sorting the famine out in Egypt – having originally gone there as a slave – sold by his brothers.

Here's a reflection by Gerald West (*Genesis, George West BRF 2006*)

**The Family's First Journey ...**

*The scene shifts again, this time from Egypt to Canaan. What unites these very different contexts is the famine. When Jacob (as he is called in **verse 4**, but note the name Israel in **verse 5**) hears that there is grain in Egypt, he does not hesitate – although his sons do (**verse 1b**) He orders them to go there and buy grain. The brothers have either become lethargic from the lack of food (a common symptom of malnutrition) or they have some premonition of what awaits them.*

*Jacob has not changed in at least one respect: he still favours the sons of Rachel. So he sends the remaining ten brothers to Egypt, keeping Benjamin with him. Israel's fear for Benjamin's safety is not unfounded, for he has already lost one favourite son. There is a sense of justice in this, too, for Benjamin was almost certainly too young to have participated in his brothers' dastardly deed. This trip to Egypt will reunite those brothers who last met in the fields near Dothan.*

**Back to Egypt ...**

*The scene shifts back to Egypt. The narrative pace quickens, and without much preamble the brothers are bowing before Joseph, as Jacob's interpretation of his dream predicted they would (**37:10**). Wherever Joseph goes in Egypt, his assistants shout for those before his chariot to bow the knee (**41:43**). Now his brothers bow their knees (**verse 6**) even though no one tells them to.*

*Immediately Joseph recognises them, while they remain unaware of who he is. He has changed, but they have not (although how much each party has changed remains to be tested more deeply). This asymmetrical knowledge sustains the narrative for the next few scenes, and the reader anxiously waits for the anticipated moment of recognition or revelation. Joseph's first response is a strange, though perhaps not unexpected one. He pretends to be a stranger, and he speaks harshly to them (**verse 7**). The absence of peace (shalom) continues!*

*It is only when they bow before him, we are told, that Joseph remembers his dreams (**verse 9**). His second, more reflected, response is also odd, and this time the reasons are harder to find. Why does he accuse them of being spies, and what is the relationship of this charge to his dreams? If Joseph's response **PTO***

*is not easy to fathom, neither is the response of the brothers in turn (**verse 13**). Perhaps the incoherence of both Joseph's and the brothers' behaviour is the narrative's signal that communication is completely broken between them.*

### **Power ...**

*The Joseph story is in many respects a story of power. As his father's favourite, Joseph had power, and used it. As a group, his brothers had power, and used it to sell him into slavery. Now Joseph has power, and again he uses it to reassert his charge against them (**verse 12**). But he offers them a way out, a test. The test is based on the knowledge they have volunteered, and as such makes some sense. If they are indeed ten of twelve brothers, with one 'no more', then there should be one more brother. One of them must go and fetch Benjamin.*

*Swearing an oath on the name of Pharaoh (twice), Joseph allows no further discussion, but places them in prison. Having allowed them to sweat for three days (the same amount of time that Abraham had in Genesis 22 to prepare for his test), he summons them and puts his test before them. Having had time to think, he has modified the test. Instead of one going back to Canaan to fetch Benjamin, one is to remain in prison, and the rest are to return. Why Joseph changes the test is not clear, but the most likely reason is that he has come to realise that one brother would not be able to carry sufficient grain back to Canaan to sustain the family there (**see verse 19b**). So perhaps Joseph's change of plan is motivated by compassion for the rest of the family back home.*

*This time Joseph does not swear an oath on Pharaoh; instead he invokes God (**verse 18**). This shift may be significant, for it has been unclear from the narrative quite where Joseph stands with God since his rise to power. Publicly the brothers agree – for what else can they do? – but privately there are only recriminations and guilt (**verse 21**). At last the reader is given some clue to Joseph's behaviour. Is it perhaps to induce in his brothers the despair that he felt when they abandoned him to the pit and slavery? The earlier narrative did not tell us that Joseph pleaded for his life, but his brothers now remember his cries vividly. From Reuben's reaction it appears that the brothers imagine Joseph to have died (**verse 22**), but he is not dead: he is very much alive and in control of their lives.*

### **Prayer ... 'Forgive us, Father, for the hurt we inflict on others.'**

What might God want us to reflect on?

Perhaps the way in which God can work – despite our sins and failings?

Perhaps to repent of hurt we have inflicted on others?

Perhaps to trust God for the long-term even when things go greatly awry in the short-term?

Amen.