

Dear Friends,

Genesis 39:1 – 44:17

Joseph has gone from being top dog, his father's favourite, to bottom dog, a slave in a foreign land. His own brothers laid hands on him, stripped him of his outer clothes, and threw him in a pit. He could not get himself out. Some travellers passed by and his brothers decided to sell him to them as a slave. This was likely a death sentence. Slaves aren't expected to last long.

This, I think, is Joseph's trauma. He will try to forget it, to blot it out, but the memory will continue to eat away at him. It will be as though he keeps returning to it, as though he keeps being thrown into a pit and then has desperately to try and claw his way out. It's like a pattern that keeps repeating, a Groundhog Day of the same story that is told again and again.

So, he is thrown into the pit of slavery, but he claws his way up from the bottom and becomes the most trusted servant. Then, he gets thrown into the pit of prison and again manages to claw his way out and up. He becomes powerful. The second most important person in the land, with only Pharaoh above him. He marries Aesenth, the daughter of the highest priest in Egypt. They have a child. They call him Manasseh. Manasseh means "causing to forget". Joseph says, "God has made me forget all my hardship, and all my father's house". That's right Joseph you have forgotten the past so completely that you have given your son a name that will always remind you of the thing you have forgotten. How does that work? The memory just won't go away will it?

Eventually Joseph has to look again at his trauma because his brothers turn up asking for food to see them through a time of famine. Joseph, it says, makes himself strange to them. What we want is for these brothers all to come close, but Joseph keeps his brothers at a distance. The words "He made himself strange to them" could however also be translated "He made himself strange to himself". Both are true. He puts distance between himself and his brothers. He also puts distance between himself and himself. He tries to deny and forget his own story. He needs to come close to himself and the truth about himself and he needs to come close to his brothers.

He controls everything that happens. He manipulates his brothers. He accuses them of being spies. He imprisons them, as they once imprisoned him. He makes them fear for their lives, as he once feared for his. They speak to each other not realising that Joseph can understand every word they say. They say, "We are paying the price for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us". So, when they threw Joseph into a pit, he pleaded with them for his life, he begged them for help. He cried out for mercy. And they did not listen. They just carried on eating their lunch while he suffered.

And the brothers have lived with this. For Joseph it was a trauma. For the brothers also it was a trauma. They have had to face up to the knowledge that they are the kind of people who can take their own brother, lay hands on him, strip him and throw him into a pit ignoring his cries for help. They are the kind of people who sell their brother and sentence him to almost certain death. They thought that by getting rid of Joseph they would create a space for themselves in their father's heart, so that they could have more of his love. But it only created space in their father for grief. They saw that grief every day and they knew that they were responsible.

The story goes on. There are comings and goings. Joseph continues to play with his brothers. He gets them to the point where he threatens to separate Benjamin from them, to take Benjamin as a slave while the rest go free. Benjamin is Joseph's one full brother. The only other child of Rachel. Will they treat Rachel's other son as they treated Joseph? He puts them back into the situation in which they put themselves so many years ago. How will they react this time? Will they stand by and allow Benjamin to be taken as a slave as they once allowed Joseph to go into slavery? Or this time will it be different?

God bless you,

Tony