

Dear Friends

Genesis 37: 1-28

Joseph's brothers hated Joseph and they could not speak peaceably to him. Right at the beginning of our story, we are shown that there's a problem that needs a solution, there's something wrong that needs to be put right. We hope that the story will take us to a place where the brothers may draw close, speak well, and be at peace with each other. We might never quite fully get to that, but at least we hope for something a whole lot better than what we have now. We hope to get to a place where healing and reconciliation are possible.

The story teller asks us to understand how the brothers are feeling. They have their reasons to hate Joseph. Joseph brings bad reports about some of them to their father. We notice that Joseph takes aim at those at the bottom of the pecking order. Their father, Jacob, has never made any secret of who his favourites are. The sons of Rachel, his favourite wife, are at the top. Those of Leah are in the middle. And those of Rachel and Leah's maids are at the bottom. Joseph's target is the brothers at the bottom, the sons of the maids. We don't like it when people, especially those at the top, have a go at those who are already at a disadvantage. It's not right. It's no surprise therefore that the brothers feel hatred towards Joseph.

Joseph is also full of himself. In biblical stories someone's first words often give you an insight into their character. Joseph opens with "Listen to this dream that I dreamed". He likes to be in the spotlight, to be the centre of attention. He tells them how in his dream, they all bow down to him. That's not likely to endear them to him is it?

But hardest to stomach is that Joseph is their father's favourite. Jacob shows his particular love for Joseph by giving him a special coat. The others feel hurt to be less loved. They would like to have their father's love. They would like to be given a nice coat. They feel jealous. Jealousy is a dark emotion. It's dangerous. People do terrible things when jealousy takes hold.

Jacob can see that all is not well between Joseph and his brothers. That troubles him. He spent years fearing his brother Esau, who once made plans to kill him. He does not want his children to live in fear of each other as he lived in fear of Esau.

So, when all the brothers are out taking care of the flock, Jacob sends Joseph to them. He says, "Go now, see if there is peace with your brothers". They cannot speak peaceably, maybe they need to get together and try. Off Joseph goes. He chooses to wear his special coat. Maybe that was a mistake. The brothers see him coming. They make plans to murder him.

They don't kill him, not immediately. They might later. They have not yet made up their minds. Reuben is against it. Others are for it. They lay hands on him, strip off his coat and throw him in a pit. The pit, most likely, was a large hole in the ground

used to store water, a cistern. They were shaped like a bottle with a narrow neck. You could put a person in quite easily. Once in, a person could not get out. Then, with Joseph trapped in the pit, the brothers sit down and eat.

They see some travellers coming and it gives them an idea. Instead of murdering Joseph, they could sell him. "After all," they say "He is our brother, our own flesh, we should not lay hands on him. Better to sell him. He'll be as good as dead. Slaves aren't expected to live long. They all die very quickly".

And so, Joseph goes from being at the top, from being his father's favourite to being a slave at the very, very bottom. The brothers watch him go. "That's the last we'll see of him" they think. Later, they are quiet. They wonder "What have we done? What kind of people are we to do such a thing to our own brother?" At least, they believe, with Joseph out of the way they might get more of their father's love. But the loss of Joseph does not create room for them, it only creates room, in Jacob, for grief. They see this grief every day. They know that they are responsible.

Joseph is a slave, not expecting to live long. Jacob is overwhelmed by grief. The remaining brothers are filled with guilt. This is a horror story. Surely no good can come of it.

God bless you,

Tony