

A Prayer of Confession

Lord God,
I'm sorry for the times I take my eyes off you,
and seek to do things in my own strength.
I'm sorry for the times I doubt that
you can keep me on the straight and narrow.
I'm sorry for the times I ask you for signs.
Lord, I pray that you will forgive
my doubts and hesitations,
show me your loving presence,
especially when I most need it,
and teach me to trust you at all times.
Amen.

Read Genesis Chapter 37 verses 1-4, 12-28

Sermon by Rev Peter Lyth

Sibling Rivalry is the stuff of many a dramatic and gripping story. It forms the basis of many pieces of literature – John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* is based on the story of Cain and Abel (the title comes from Cain's exile to the land of Nod, located to the east of Eden). In this case, the sibling rivalry is between two brothers, sparked by parental favouritism, and is worsened when one falls for the other's girlfriend. As you can see, the basis is a story from very early in the Old Testament. There are many others, the *Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, the list is very long. The Old Testament reading is the start of a very familiar story in that genre – the story of Joseph – he of the Technicolour dreamcoat. The story does not start well. In order to fully understand what's going on, we need to look a little at the family structure (this gets quite complex). His father Jacob (who had some dodgy moments in the past conning his brother Esau out of his birthright) had a life that would be described as "complicated" in current parlance. He had two wives, Leah and Rachel. The story goes that he worked for his uncle Laban whose daughter Rachel, Jacob fell in love with. He was told that he had to work for Laban for 7 years to earn her hand. But when the wedding came about, Laban substituted his other daughter Leah and Jacob had to work another seven years to become married to Rachel. He went on to have 13 children, 10 of whom were founders of tribes of Israel. Leah bore him his only daughter, Dinah, and six sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi (who did not found a tribe, but was the ancestor of the Levites), Judah (from whom a tribe and the

Davidic monarchy were descended), Issachar, and Zebulun. Leah's maidservant, Zilpah, bore him Gad and Asher, and Rachel's maidservant, Bilhah, bore him Dan and Naphtali. Rachel's sons were Benjamin and Joseph (who did not found a tribe, but whose sons founded the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim). This is complex but goes some way to explain why it was that Joseph would become his father's favourite – after all, he was Rachel's son and Rachel was Jacob's favourite wife. Benjamin probably had not been born at this stage.

So there are underlying family tensions. It doesn't help that Jacob gives him a special coat – the famed “coat of many colours”. The reality is that the description is based on a mis-translation in the King James Version of the Bible. What we do know from elsewhere is that it was probably a very fine garment, made of the finest material and was a sign of status and favour. We are also told that Joseph being the favourite caused considerable animosity, hatred even from his half-brothers. Unfortunately, Joseph does not help himself in this situation. He told tales about two of them (about what we don't know) to his father which would fuel the resentment still further. In a further passage which we don't hear this morning, he has two dreams, firstly of a group of sheaves, one of which rises up whilst the others bow down to it. The second is that the sun, moon and eleven stars bow down to him. In each case, the implication is that his siblings (and indeed his father and mother) would bow down to him. When he told this to his father (actually, you would think he would have more sense) even he was angry. Needless to say, his half brothers were incensed. It is very hard to have any sympathy with Joseph at this stage, strutting around, telling his brothers that they would ultimately serve him. No wonder they came up with a plan for his destruction.

Joseph is sent out to find his half-brothers near Shechem. Even the fact that he was at home when the others were sent out to work points to him being treated more favourably. And it is when he finds them that things take a twist. Their first idea is to kill him then throw his body into a pit. Then one of the brothers, Reuben suggests that they throw him down the pit whilst alive and leave him there. Given that is in the middle of the desert, it's hardly a better option, although we are told that Reuben intended to rescue him later.

Finally, a more palatable option emerges, Judah spies a passing band of Ishmaelite/Midianites and proposes that his brother is sold to them in slavery. Joseph is deprived of the robe which would be taken back to his father as evidence that he was devoured by a ferocious animal. So the robe changes from a sign of status to one of his demise.

There we leave the story, but what can we learn from it? No-one comes out of it terribly well, the brothers seek to destroy Joseph and deceive their father. Jacob, Joseph's father shows favouritism to one of his children at the expense of the others. Joseph enjoys his pre-eminence and lords it over his siblings. Yet, even in this distasteful episode, you can see the hand of God guiding circumstances. Ultimately, Joseph would end up in Egypt, and would be in a position to save his family. From him would come the basis of God's people as a nation. In the meantime, Joseph lacks humility, the brothers show envy and bear false witness, all encouraged by bad parenting. It's a cautionary tale.

But it also shows that God's purpose can be served in spite of people who are in themselves not particularly good, or not really very nice. Bad things happen – but it's humanity at fault – not God. Yet God's plan transcends this.

Prayers of intercession

Lord God, we come before you to pray for all those people for whom taking risks is a way of life.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for our emergency services – paramedics, the police, the fire service – all who daily face difficult situations as they seek to help to protect us and make our world a safer and more peaceful place.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for people who work in troubled areas – the armed forces in war zones, those who bring humanitarian aid into areas of natural disaster, and many more.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for people who take risks in your name, Lord Jesus – those who take your word where it is most needed – and for people who grapple with faith and doubt.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

Amen.