

We're going to read so scripture in a moment. The subject I've chosen for our teaching for the month of July is the story of Joseph, and I've going to read you some verses from Genesis chapter 37.

[Reading: Genesis 37:1-13, 20-36]

So there's that first reading that we're sharing about the life of Joseph – a very well-known reading; many of you will have seen the film, or even the play, of Joseph and his multi-coloured dream coat. And so this is one of the most well known stories from the Old Testament; but I want to just spend a few moments thinking about this story.

Every family has its issues. (And I don't know that you can see that picture there, but) it's a picture of a mum and a son having what looks like a heated argument. We were thinking earlier of the pressures that lockdown has putting many families in during the last few months, but even without this extraordinary time we've been confined with our families; we all know that every family has its issues and its tensions to deal with, but the special tensions that I think Joseph's family, or rather Jacob's family (Jacob's the head of the family); the things that he had going on his family. I guess every family is unique, but there were very special issues that Jacob's family faced. (Now Jacob was renamed by God as Israel, so that's why we often get the name Israel in the reading rather than him being called Jacob, but it's the same person.) So Jacob had some particular issues: he had a favourite son, Joseph, who is born in his old age (what sometimes gets called his dotage). So in his dotage, when he was drawing close to the end of his own life, this new little boy was born to him, and he was born to Jacob's favourite wife; and I suggest to you there are two major problems: don't have more than one wife, and if you do happen to have more than one wife don't have a favourite, and if you do have a favourite wife of your wives, don't have a favourite child within that family, because favouritism in a family is always a mistake – it's always a mistake. Each of our children may be very different; we should never have favourites in the family because it just causes tension as we see in this reading. Also we find that Joseph and his dreams of greatness, they also cause real problems and tensions: Joseph was a dreamer of a boy.

I get the feeling that Joseph never had to do a solid day's work in his life: he wasn't out in the fields looking after the flocks, he was back home with his mum and dad – the only time he had to go out and work was when he had to go off and check on how his brothers were doing. And can't you just imagine every time Joseph appeared: here he is, he's come out to check out how the workers are doing, but he's not a worker himself; and you can just imagine the tensions it must have caused. And then on top of all of that he had these dreams. Now I've learnt there are some things you may think but you don't say them because you know it's going to cause problems, and Joseph had this dream and he was so insensitive to the tensions in his own family that he thought it would be a good idea to share them with everybody, and I think we can say that wasn't his best decision: sharing his dream; well, not just one dream. When you've shared the first one and it doesn't go down that well, when I've had the second one I think I'd have probably thought; "You know what, I'll keep that one to myself!" But not Joseph: "Look I've had this even better dream; it's not just sheaves of wheat now, it's the sun and the moon that are bowing down before me."

So, these are the two major problems that I think we can identify very easily in Jacob's family: Jacob's favouritism as a father, and Joseph's arrogance and his insensitivity to the rest of his

family. Joseph's dreams caused jealousy, anger and hurt, mainly to his brothers, but even to his father Jacob, when even he says "What, me, your father, and your mother, we're going to bow down to you?" Nonetheless, when Jacob hears the tragic story from his other sons of what has happened to his favourite son Joseph, and he sees the blood-soaked robe (in verses 31 to 33 of the reading) he is devastated. Now I know there was a lot of provocation from Joseph but what an awful thing to do to your father: not just to take the robe, but to dip it in the blood of a goat to give a strong indication to Jacob as to what has happened to his son Joseph. And so that devastation, despite the fact Jacob that made lots of mistakes as a dad, it must have been horrendous to see that robe. So, Joseph for all his boasting he's gone, he's been taken off by these Midianite traders, and it seems as though his dreams have gone with him – he was very nearly murdered by his brothers but he was saved from death by one of them, by one brother pleading on behalf of the life of his, perhaps undeserving, brother Joseph. So they sold him into slavery; and perhaps they thought that would be a clean break with their obnoxious dreamer of a brother. I find it interesting that we're heard quite a lot about slavery, modern day slavery, in our world in these days. And it's interesting that even this story that must be over 3000 years since these events happened, this is still so current in our world today: that slavery is still a reality in our modern world. But I think these brothers, perhaps when they saw their father's grief and how he mourned, and how he said "I will go to my grave mourning for my son," I wonder whether their hearts must have been touched, and their consciences must have been really pricked by what they had done. So, like a piece of property they sell off their brother: firstly to these Midianite merchants, but then, of course, they themselves sell him to this Egyptian Pharaoh, Pharaoh's official by the name of Potiphar.

Let's think for a moment about the family's reaction to Joseph's apparent death. Apart from the grief of Jacob, the father, we know little of how the rest of the brothers felt, although we can draw conclusions that perhaps they regretted this decision of selling off their brother; the interesting thing for me is what do I know of Rachel the mum? What did she feel? We know nothing! It seems as though a mother's grief wasn't even worth recording in the Bible narrative. But she must have felt every bit as much grief as the father, but it's not recorded for us; it seems as though even down through the centuries since then many woman's feelings in life have been denied and ignored, just as Rachel's were in this passage. And the Me Too movement in the last few years has helped us to realise that so often we have ignored the voices of women, young women, mothers, women in different circumstances – we have ignored voices for too long. Going back to the brothers later developments suggest that they carried around their sense of guilt and shame for many year. But despite this unpromising, treacherous start within this family, God has other plans for Joseph and for his family: there are going to be tough situations ahead and more family problems, but God will in the end demonstrate his love, his sovereignty and his faithfulness through this flawed and fractured family. You like me may sometimes feel a bit like Joseph's family. None of our families are perfect – they all have their issues, we all have our secrets and our difficulties: you know we often have an uncle or an aunt who's a bit difficult, and we have to sort of endure their behaviour, or their words, or whatever it is. We may feel a bit like Joseph's family in that way.

I read this story about a lost dog this week. It was spotted in a lost and found section of a newspaper years ago, and it says: "Lost dog. £50 reward. It's a black and tan dog of poodle and German shepherd descent, it's flea bitten, it's left Hind leg is missing, it has no hair on its rump, it's partly blind, and it's recently been neutered, and it answers to the name of 'Lucky'." Well, some of us are a bit like Lucky: of mixed ancestry, of not much to look at, and in pretty bad shape as our

families, but still, actually, we do answer to the name of Lucky, because we are actually fortunate despite all the problems, despite any infirmities and any issues in our families, we still have someone who cares for us, just like the owner of that dog who cared enough for Lucky to put an advert in the paper. We have someone who cares enough about us, to look for us, to seek and search for us, to want to reach us; and that is God – he is the one who reached out to each one of us and says “This person's not perfect but I love them,” just as the owner of Lucky cared enough to put that advert out. That dog is lucky, or was lucky, and so are we, lucky that we have a Lord and Saviour who reached out for each one of us.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we are reminded that no family is perfect, no person is perfect, and yet we believe that we are, perhaps we wouldn't use the word “lucky”, but we are blessed. We are blessed because you Lord chose to search for and find us. Your word tells us that while we were still sinners you Lord Jesus died for us. You have pursued and found us, and Lord God we thank you for your love that sought us out, even when we were so far from you. So Lord God, we thank you that we are blessed and we pray that we will not only live in that blessing but have the confidence to share the fact that we are lucky and blessed with our friends and neighbours, and work colleagues, and whoever else we might meet, but we are blessed by you because you sought and found us. Amen