

**„Joseph“
Sermon on Genesis 46: 28-32 & 47:11+12**

Joseph went up to meet his father. And as soon as he appeared before him, he threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time...

This, sisters and brothers, is almost the end of a breathtaking human story of triumphs and disasters. The narrator uses thirteen chapters of the Old Testament book of Genesis to tell the story of Joseph.

Do you remember Joseph and his brothers?

When did you come across them last?

Are they part of your childhood memories?

They are certainly part of mine. I remember us as children in the evenings, already in our pyjamas, tired and excited at the same time, waiting for our grandmother to tell us goodnight stories from the Bible. She used to sit on our bed, and we just couldn't get enough of the men and women she would give life to with her stories. And we loved Joseph's story the most.

We loved this little Joseph, at the time the youngest of 11 brothers, who already as a child dreamed that one day he'd be a great man, before whom even his own brothers would bow down.

We suffered with Joseph when his envious brothers threw him into the empty water cistern and sold him as a slave for Egypt.

We were as smart as Joseph and interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams, telling him about the 7 years of abundance and the 7 years of famine to follow.

Together with Joseph we became ministers in Egypt. We led the country wisely and were loved by everybody.

We helped Joseph sell grain to his brothers in need.

We observed them carefully and didn't reveal ourselves.

We loved Joseph's idea of hiding the silver cup in Benjamin's sack to frighten his brothers.

And we wept with Joseph, rejoiced with him and celebrated with him, when he finally made himself known to his brothers, when he had his father brought into the country and hugged him after all those years.

We longed to be this Joseph, loved by God, having to bear the almost unbearable but nevertheless always somehow coming out on top.

And last but not least: we adored the richly ornamented robe that Joseph had been given by his father and that exceeded all that we could imagine...

Today, however, looking at the story with the eyes of an adult, I find it hard to identify with Joseph immediately or entirely. And I realise that the story doesn't demand that from me at all.

Rather, the story invites us to observe carefully and discover its many different facets... looking here and there, identifying with this, not being bothered by that, and seeing new aspects of it the longer we look...

The privileged little favourite comes to my mind, spoiled and always put first by the father, sneaking and tale-telling, naïve and ignorant.

Or much later: Joseph using his power over his brothers, challenging them, testing and terrifying them...playing games with them, until they kneel before him trembling with fear. Would I want to be like him?

I would like to invite us all to listen to the story of Joseph again today, with adult ears, and maybe with mixed feelings.

Joseph's childhood is as bright as it can possibly be. Hardly ever has a child been so much the heart's desire of his or her parents. When Rachel gives birth to Joseph, after all these years of waiting in vain, she and Jacob are overjoyed. When Rachel bears a second son, Benjamin, and dies in childbirth, Jacob transfers all the love he had for Rachel onto Joseph. He favours him before his other sons, has that legendarily beautiful coat made for him that makes Joseph stand out forever.

Have you already noticed, how difficult it is with this story, how one cannot easily take one side and look down upon or judge or even condemn the other...?And just here, we can see the advantage of telling a story; just telling it, nothing more and nothing less. We don't have to judge and decide...

We are simply invited to watch and see, let the story flow and happen, experience parts of it, identify with other parts of it and maybe discover ourselves here and there. The Biblical narrator does not want to judge and condemn, but to show and offer...

Joseph is 17 years old, and has this dream that foretells his future. The fact that he doesn't keep silent about it, but enthusiastically shares it with his brothers, shows how young he still is, how inexperienced, how little he knows about life.

Jacob, who witnesses the telling of the dream, tries to slow Joseph down a bit by questioning the content of the dream. And also his brothers react openly and spontaneously, and in fact offer an opportunity to notice and learn...

What is the root of all the unfortunate things that happen? Is it Joseph's dream? Or the fact that he talks about the dream? Is it Jacob's love? For Joseph? For his beloved wife? Or is it the jealousy of the brothers?

Without any attempt to answer these questions, the storyteller carries on...

After the highlight of his dreams, Joseph finds himself back in everyday life and its demands. His brothers have gone far away to graze their father's flock of sheep. The father sends Joseph to them to see if everything is all right and report back. Joseph cannot find his brothers immediately, because they have moved on to new pasture. After some searching and asking, Joseph finds them.

They see him in the distance and at once plot to kill him.

Rueben, the eldest and most measured and careful of the lot, prevents the killing....

Let's not take his life, don't lay hand on him, but let's throw him in the empty cistern. ...there, Rueben thought, he could always come back later and rescue him.

But: faster than Rueben can do anything, a caravan of merchants comes along, bound for Egypt, and Joseph gets sold to them as a slave.

Some time later the brothers are terrified of the consequences of their actions.

What are they now going to tell their father?

To cover up their evil deed, the brothers dip Joseph's robe in the blood of a slaughtered goat; take it back to Jacob saying a wild animal has killed his favourite son.

Jacob weeps bitter tears. And his sons try to comfort the inconsolable...

In the Musical “Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat”, a modern version of the Joseph story, Levi, one of the brothers, sings:

“Father, we’ve something to tell you, a story of our time, a tragic but inspiring tale of manhood in its prime. You know you had a dozen sons, well now that’s not quite true, but feel no sorrow, do not grieve, he wouldn’t want you to.”

And then they all join in singing:

“There’s one more angel in heaven, there’s one more star in the sky, Joseph we’ll never forget you, it’s tough but we’re gonna get by....”

We all know that this song is a lie, and even its beautiful music cannot prevent Jacob from being overwhelmed by darkness and grief. No matter how nicely the brothers sing, the evil they have committed now haunts them all.

However, the storyteller of the Joseph story is interested in Joseph’s future.

It is a big fall from favourite son to slave. But Joseph is lucky things didn’t turn out even worse. In Egypt he is sold to an important minister of the Pharaoh.

Joseph gets a fair chance to prove who he is and what he is capable of. Whatever he “touches”, turns out fine. He soon wins the approval of his master...

but also of his master’s wife.

Mrs Potiphar would love to see the handsome young slave in her bed. But Joseph resists her advances. And the more unavailable he is to his mistress, the more he becomes an object of her desire.

And one day, when nobody else is in the house, she abandons all reserve, and pulls Joseph into her bed. He tears himself away, loses his shirt on the way, and runs off. Disappointed and humiliated, Mrs Potiphar tells her husband and all the others, how Joseph had made a pass at her. And to prove this, she is holding his ripped shirt in her hand.

Potiphar is furious and, believing his wife, has his servant thrown into prison.

Is that the end of all the dreams?

Joseph’s fall – deeper and deeper. As if fate had only evil in store for him...

You cannot really fall deeper than into prison. Especially when you are a slave. When you don’t have a family or any other support. As far as everyone else is concerned, you are as good as dead. You are totally forgotten.

But once more things turn out well for Joseph.

It doesn’t take long, and it doesn’t take much, and the prison guard makes Joseph his assistant. As Joseph served in the house of Potiphar before, so he now serves in the prison.

He experiences the depths of human life. He learns about the extremes of human existence: about unfortunate and harsh conditions, about injustice and cruelty, about misfortune and wickedness, and about real guilt and simple bad luck. He now learns to be careful, clever and courageous, to weigh his deeds and actions and share his talents appropriately.

Joseph starts interpreting the dreams of the other prisoners. And one of them, one who’s just made it to freedom again, one of them remembers him years later.

The chief cup bearer of the Pharaoh learns about the Pharaoh's dreams, dreams that haunt him and that he cannot understand.

Do you remember the scene?

In the royal palace of the mightiest man in the country they talk about 7 sleek and fat cows coming up out of the river? Then there were again 7 cows, ugly and lean. And the lean ones ate up the fat ones?

And the ears of corn? Again 7. Healthy and good. Then another 7 – thin and scorched by the east wind. And the thin ears of corn swallowed up the healthy ones...

When a pharaoh dreams, he doesn't dream for himself.

Too much depends on him, the God-king; like the destiny of the whole nation.

So his dreams are not a private matter but an affair of state.

Magicians and wise men from all over the country are called to the king, but cannot interpret these dreams that so trouble him.

A climate of political crisis spreads through the court. The Pharaoh is clutching at every little straw. And they call Joseph from the dungeon and ask him to the palace.

Even now Joseph knows the way things should be done. He doesn't come before the Pharaoh in his prison uniform. Before he enters the royal home he asks for appropriate clothes and a chance to comb his hair...

And with the dignity of a mature and experienced man he lets the Pharaoh know that it is not Joseph himself but God who sends dreams and prophecies a radiant future.

When asked about the Pharaoh's dreams, it doesn't take Joseph long to explain. He knows that in Egypt the wellbeing of the people, including the head of state, depends entirely on the Nile. The river influences the fertility of the land. And so Joseph tells the king that there will be 7 years of overflowing abundance followed by 7 years of poor harvests and hunger.

Joseph immediately offers all the advice he can give. He suggests the king assigns a wise person as commissioner over the land to collect part of the harvest during the years of abundance and store it in the cities for later.

Joseph helps the Pharaoh to understand that he mustn't give in but carefully lead the people, change the bad prophecy into sth good, hold sth in reserve and use it during the bad years so the country will not be ruined...

The Pharaoh does not only appreciate Joseph's remarkable talent of explaining dreams but also finds that this must surely be the man who can carry out the very plans he has just proposed.

"...there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders..."he says to Joseph and he makes him his second-in-command.

Joseph is 30 years old when he starts working for the welfare of the land of Egypt: the land produces well, Joseph collects its produce and stores it. He keeps vast quantities of grain; and at a certain point it is so much that he stops keeping records...it is just beyond measure.

And when the years of abundance come to an end, and the years of famine begin, Joseph starts to sell it in the name of the Pharaoh.

The famine is severe all over the area. And Jacob and his sons in the land of Canaan suffer, too.

So Jacob keeps Benjamin at home, and sends his older sons to Egypt to buy grain for them.

Joseph recognises his brothers immediately. He remembers his dream from when he was young... Now it is coming true.

His brothers however have no idea who they are standing in front of.

Joseph takes advantage of the situation, and plays this game with his brothers. It should not be all that easy for them – after all that had happened.

First they all get accused of being spies and are thrown into prison. Then he keeps one of them as hostage and sends the others home with sacks of grain and the order to come back with their youngest brother.

The brothers discover that the money they had paid with has been put back in their sacks, and they don't dare return to Egypt because they wouldn't know what to expect ...

In Canaan Jacob doesn't want to even think about letting Benjamin go. If anything happened to Benjamin, Jacob says, that would be the end of him. But the famine goes on, the grain is used up, and Jacob's sons have to make the journey again. With a heavy heart Jacob lets Benjamin go with them.

And back in Egypt the brothers are surprised to be invited by the minister to a banquet. Joseph struggles to hide his emotions. He can hardly hold back his tears. But he wants to test the brothers one last time.

Do you know what happens?

The story with the silver cup in Benjamin's sack? How the brothers are accused of being thieves? How Judah throws himself to the ground and begs for his brother? How they tell Joseph of Jacob, who wouldn't survive if his youngest son was punished by having to stay back in Egypt? How Judah offers himself instead... if only Joseph could let Benjamin go?

Only now Joseph can see that those who had sold him into slavery are not the same anymore. He sends everybody else out of the room, and makes himself known to his brothers.

Again he sends them back home, this time to fetch Jacob, the father. From now on they would all be living in Egypt.

And when he throws his arms around his old father after all these years, the Joseph of the musical sings:

"I closed my eyes, drew back the curtain, to see for certain what I thought I knew. Far, far away someone was weeping but the world was sleeping. Any dream will do."

He describes the brightness that now comes to him, wonderful and new... he sees the dawn breaking, the world waking, the sun rising... Reality has a different face now, and there stands Joseph, free to start right from the beginning again.

And, reconciled with his brothers and reconciled with the past, he can sing:

"May I return to the beginning, the light is dimming and the dream is too. The world and I we are still waiting, still hesitating. Any dream will do."

It is our dreams in life that can often carry us through, help us to persevere and endure... and in the end begin again.

Joseph called his first born son “Manasse”. That means “God let me forget”. To forget is one way of coping with the blows of fate. But it cannot heal the wounds and the bitterness that remain.

Joseph’s second son was called “Ephraim”. Which means “God has made me fruitful in the land of distress”.

This is certainly more positive. Doesn’t make Joseph a victim of fate, but shows a man who can succeed in life even though it is cruel and harsh at times. But here too, there’s still the old wound of having once been so rejected.....

It is only when Joseph sees that his brothers have really changed, that they have learned to take their father’s pain seriously and take responsibility for each other (which they did not at all years before when they got rid of him), that he can let go of his bitterness and feel his wounds starting to heal.

Now Joseph can re-interpret his whole life journey as a journey that was embraced and protected by God the whole time.

The happy-end of the Joseph story makes it easy to understand Joseph’s re-interpretation of his suffering. But people cannot always see far enough in their lives, their horizon is not always wide enough to perceive the real truth and understand. We have to remember, our life is not always long enough for us to be able to reach these points of understanding and new beginning...

There will always be pain and times of darkness in life, troubles which people bring upon themselves and troubles brought by others. Pain and wrong will always be part of our human existence on this earth.

We will never entirely be able to put a stop to them.

But it is up to us how we react to the dark and painful times that we have to go through; how we look at them, how we work with them; how we re-interpret them; how we learn from them and try to accept and integrate them...; how we try to change them into sth whole and new...

We will never be able to do that on our own: we can manage to do it with the help of God who doesn’t want revenge but reconciliation and peace. Amen.

Prayer

God, make us instruments of your peace, we pray.

Help us to love.

And help us to forgive.

Amen.

Song: “Any dream will do...”