

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Genesis 37:12-24 ("Joseph is Sold by His Brothers")

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' 'I am seeking my brothers,' he said; 'tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.' The man said, 'They have gone away, for I heard them say, "Let us go to Dothan."' So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him'—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah (CH: 167)

Praise the Lord with the sound of trumpet (CH: 169)

Oh, sing a new song to the Lord (CH: 61)

Just as I am, without one plea (CH: 553(i))

Crown him with many crowns (CH: 459)

During the early days of the pandemic, things which could no longer be done in person suddenly and unexpectedly had to get done online. The most obvious of these was our new morning service format each Sunday, when a pretty-much-full-sized Longniddry congregation came together over the internet, joined by friends from Gladsmuir and often far beyond.

There were other examples too. What about our very popular online Communion services? Our Lent groups? Our kirk session meetings? Looking further afield, the Church of Scotland's presbyteries and even two annual General Assemblies have managed to keep going through the use of new technology. None of this is what we might have chosen, though all of it has been astonishing in one way or another.

One great innovation of the last two years has been our Bible study virtual gatherings: one on a Tuesday evening; another on a Thursday evening; and a third on a Friday afternoon. Over the months of the pandemic we have gone through the gospel of Mark, the book of Job and also much of Genesis, where we find today's reading about Joseph.

When our groups looked at the hugely long story of Joseph, many of us were intrigued by the character complexities of this particular biblical figure. The teenage son of the aged Jacob is portrayed as a self-centred, overconfident upstart, with little to be found in his lifestyle that might be called appealing. To give you an idea, if we were to place the boy Joseph in the 21st century, he might very well appear to us like the spoilt brat upon whom a wealthy Dad had showered expensive gifts: an Italian sports car for his 17th birthday, perhaps. And maybe a high octane speed boat for his 21st. You get the idea.

What gives this story some added drama is that Joseph was actually part of a very big family. From top to bottom, here are the sons of Jacob: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar and Zebulun as the older siblings, with Joseph and Benjamin bringing up the rear. And, of course, we shouldn't overlook Jacob's (often forgotten) daughter, Dinah. The fact is that if young Joseph was going to play the spoilt brat, he would have to do it surrounded by many older brothers, some of whom were bearing what would seem to be a very big grudge against him.

Over time, tensions rose within the family when Dad gave Joseph a very special robe with long sleeves. (You could feel the fraternal jealousy rising by the minute.) Also, the young lad had the temerity to tell his brothers about a dream he had had in which all the family were harvesting grain in the fields. In the dream Joseph's sheaf stood up, and all the brothers' sheaves bowed down before it. Perhaps Joseph had been amused by this vision of his own superiority, but the brothers were definitely not laughing. Their anger at the obnoxious Joseph was leading them in one direction only ... and that direction was not a pretty one.

As we heard in our reading today, most of the brothers plotted to kill Joseph, though the eldest of them - Reuben - suggested throwing him into a pit instead. His plan was to return later to save the boy and take him back to Jacob. So instead of facing death, Joseph was hurled into the pit and left to take his chances. By the time Reuben came back to carry out his rescue mission, disaster had struck with Joseph having been found by passing traders and taken off to Egypt, and away.

The whole sad and sorry tale is one of selfishness and arrogance on the part of Joseph, and unbridled envy and jealousy in the hearts of his murderous brothers. Eventually, the story of Joseph has a happy ending. Still, it does not offer a glowing account of family life.

For one who had been so convinced of his status as Daddy's little favourite, Joseph was in for the shock of his life. The pit episode must have come as the most dreadful of sobering experiences for him: he had been tricked, taken from his father's protection and plunged into a horrific darkness in which neither his glibness nor his pride could offer him any assistance. Joseph, it appeared, was down and out.

As readers of this tale of woe, we can all place ourselves in the boy's predicament. Which of us has not played the smart Alec (or the smart Alexa) either as a child or as an adult? And haven't we all found ourselves from time to time languishing in a very personal desolation which, in truth, we had only brought upon ourselves? Even if we remove the element of hurtful human pride from this equation, surely we can all relate to the image being shown to us of a deserted, disregarded boy, scared out of his wits and utterly powerless to do anything about it.

Whatever your own experience of "the pit" might be, you may well have found it an incredibly hard place to get out of, as you contemplate who might come to your aid and how you might ever walk out into freedom. In this way, Joseph's ordeal is our ordeal. His darkness is not unlike the shadowy experiences we so easily fall into.

Interestingly, the Jewish faith has a second ancient story which it overlays upon the biblical account of Joseph and the pit. This second - completely non-biblical - story is designed to help readers reflect upon what Joseph's pit can mean when it is viewed *looking back the way*, across all the twists and turns that came his way in later life: that rescue by the traders; being carted off to Egypt; working hard to become a senior official in the court of Pharaoh; and a moving scene of reunion and reconciliation with his fearful brothers whom he is all too ready to embrace.

The additional story of Joseph runs something like this: time has gone by and the aged Jacob dies. The sons (including Joseph, now returned from Egypt) take his body for burial near to the very pit into which young Joseph had been thrown all those many years ago. Joseph recognises the fateful place and takes some time out to stand at the edge of the pit and stare into the abyss which he still recalls so vividly. He stands there silently, gazing ... gazing ... gazing into the void that had so cruelly swallowed him up. After a while the others notice what is going on and they grow concerned, worried about what might be on Joseph's mind. Has a terrible memory been stirred? If so, will their powerful sibling turn against them in his anger? But Joseph just keeps gazing, perhaps with an almost placid look on his thoughtful face. Then he opens his mouth to utter this short but heartfelt prayer:

"Blessèd is God, who performed a miracle for me in this place!"

Be in not doubt: the naive *young* Joseph (in all his finery and with such a high regard for his own prospects) would never in a million years have wished to end up in the dark and dismal pit which his brothers had in mind for him. Yet the experienced old Joseph, looking back across a long and eventful life, found himself understanding that even a terrible experience of rejection and abandonment can be harnessed and used by God, leading a poor boy off in new directions, to unimagined horizons. Only by looking back - and looking down into the pit of his youth - could Joseph recognise the sheer scale of his journey, and what that journey truly meant.

It is a terrible thing to find yourself in the depths of the pit. But as you reflect on how far you have fallen, you might also discover that someone is there with you, ready to lead you up and lead you out, graciously performing a miracle beyond words in a place of desolation.

Blessèd is God who performs a miracle. Amen.

Praying for others

Loving, heavenly Father,
your love and unfailing grace span the ages.

Like Joseph, many of your children stare into the abyss of their past,
their own love weak and stained with harmful ambition.

Grant all who are trapped in the pit of their own selfishness
patience with others, especially their nearest and dearest
who can provoke such strong emotions.

We pray for grievances to be set aside with forgiveness and renewal embraced.

May long-held hurts and resentments be overcome
so all states can be wiped clean, and your healing love can prevail.

In your Church all around the world,
may your grace be reflected in followers of Jesus, as Christians across the globe
give selflessly to others all that you have so graciously bestowed
upon your people, the Body of Christ.

Inspire us to disperse your gifts of love to all,
wherever we go and with whoever we meet.

Guide us in all our living and in all our loving,
through your Son Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill considers the food that we eat:

You are, so they say, what you eat. This would make me both nuts and crackers,
though you probably know that already.

Everyone's different. Some people present as herbivores, eating only a plant-based diet. Others go in the opposite direction, claiming to be something close to carnivorous. For the most part, people in our part of world tend to be omnivores, and that's precisely where I have always stood, eating fruit and veg, meat and fish, and (as noted elsewhere) large handfuls of nuts and crackers.

The problem for us omnivores is that we are eating in a selfish way. The cultivation of meat has been shown to take up a huge amount of land, lots of raw materials and more than a fair bit of water. In addition, the rearing of cattle has a big impact, not least in the methane burden it presents for our suffering planet.

In all honesty, I don't imagine that I will ever be a vegetarian, but I know for sure and certain that I could and should eat less meat while increasing my intake of veg. Indeed, I am confident that this goes for many (for most?) of us. With this in mind, the season of Lent can offer us a great opportunity to give up some of the meat that is currently in our diet. To help us along, our church website will be encouraging everyone with a plant-based recipe for each of the seven weeks leading up to Easter. One meal a week across our church community could make a considerable dent in our collective meat-eating and - who knows - it might even inspire us to keep going with these and similar recipes in time to come.

More on this soon. Meanwhile, *bon appétit!*