



by Mike Harrison

By the grace of God

Joseph's story, Genesis 41 – 45

The experience of Christians can be one of sensing ourselves not quite at home in our society, feeling like aliens in a culture indifferent to and sometimes hostile to our faith. If so, then it is worth reflecting on Joseph's story, one forcibly removed from his own family and country, and whose response to 'exile', particularly as distilled in *Gen 45: 6-8*, gives pause for thought.

Living out of God's providence

'Life is lived forward but understood backward' said the theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Joseph says to his brothers 'it was not you who sent me here, but God' (*Gen 45: 8*). He has taken a good look at what's happened to himself, a roller-coaster ride including being beaten and sold into slavery by jealous brothers; finding gainful employment as Potiphar's household manager; being unjustly imprisoned after being stitched up by Potiphar's wife for not sleeping with her; being recognized as a wise interpreter of dreams and eventually rising to the status of governor of all Egypt. And in all this, he recognizes God's hand.

Pause for thought

The spiritual director, Christopher Bryant, after listening to a litany of grumbling and complaint from one person, leaned forward as the person drew breath to launch into a further tirade and whispered quietly, 'Have you thought of thanking God for this?'

Joseph's story announces that the world of cause and effect is not all there is, that beyond our deciding and choosing there is another reality, hidden, unpredictable and surprising, which is at work, a reality



The recognition of Joseph by his brothers (detail)

by Peter Cornelius 1816 – 17

eluding the powers and attention of this world. The idea of God's providence can disturb us, not least because it questions our certainties and sense of control.

Joseph's story suggests that God is able to take our lives forward in ways which we may not even recognize. Not in the sense of our being 'fated' or having our lives settled ahead of times, but rather in ways which can open us and even dire situations we're in to fresh understanding and grace-filled transformation.

Living out of God's generosity

How do we know if God has been at work in and through Joseph's dramatic journey? Or, put another way, 'if Joseph lives as he does now, has revelation happened?' Well look at Joseph's remarkable behaviour

towards his erstwhile jealous and frankly murderous brothers. When the opportunity comes to take revenge for those wasted years in slavery, in jail, in exile, Joseph acts not vengefully but generously, seeking to share the abundance of God's blessing with them. Joseph has always believed in God's promise that through the preserved family of his father Jacob God would bless the entire earth, and he continues to read God's providence into his being 'sent' to Egypt, as the one who would be well-placed to preserve Jacob's family at the needful time (45.7). Joseph's response to his brothers is entirely without resentment, acting out of a sense of God's generosity rather than any human tit-for-tat towards those who wished him most harm. This suggests the remarkable impact of God and God's promises on Joseph. God has indeed been at work.

Living out of God

And yet . . . and yet curiously it is Jacob's fourth son Judah who receives primacy, not Joseph (*Gen 49: 8*) and it is not through Joseph's line that God blesses the peoples of the world but through the line of his brother Judah (*cf Mt 1: 2-3*). Perhaps there are hints in the story that Joseph's behaviour is not entirely above reproach. When the people turn to Joseph to open up the grain reserves, the grain which originally belonged to the people and was taken from them and stored for their own good in times of leanness . . . this grain is sold to them! (NB not just 'rationed').

Or again, consider Joseph's original proposal to Pharaoh that overseers be appointed to take a fifth of the harvest in the seven good years in preparation for the seven lean years that would follow (*Gen 41: 34*). Later this emergency measure turns into a requirement to give Pharaoh a fifth of their produce in perpetuo and on that condition Joseph is prepared to let their starving children live; 'So Joseph made it a statute . . . and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth' (*Gen 47: 24-26*).

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