

SERMON: 9 August 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

" Hold on to the Dream"

(Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28)

We've been following the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Book of Genesis and we're getting to the story of Joseph.

By way of filling in since last week we find that the brothers , Jacob and Esau, are reconciled to each other after 20 years of separation.

And chapter 35 begins with God saying to Jacob 'it's time to move on to Bethel'. This is part of Jacob's journey to his father's homeland; the place where both Abraham and Isaac had settled.

And when he got to Bethel, we're told that God appeared to Jacob again. This time reminding him that he was no longer Jacob but Israel; telling him to multiply and fill the earth, to become a great nation, even many great nations and promising to give him the land of his fathers.

It's on the journey home towards Bethlehem, that Rachel dies whilst giving birth to a second son, Benjamin.

Bethlehem, that place where a saviour would be born, who would be Christ, God with us.

Jacob buries Rachel and finally makes it home, to his father Isaac at Hebron.

Some time later, Isaac dies and both Jacob and Esau are there to bury him.

Chapter 37 begins the story of Joseph aged 17. Joseph is a dreamer, encouraged to dream by his father Jacob and treated as the favourite son. Not wonder his brothers grew up to despise him.

Joseph dressed in the cloak of favouritism hasn't yet learned to hold back his dreams and unwisely reveals his dreams to his father and brothers.

Now we know with the benefit of hindsight that the dream comes true and the day would come when Jacob and the brothers would bow down before Joseph.

But there's a long way to go and a lot of life to be lived before then.

And we know that the day will come when Joseph will tell his brothers that what they intended as harm "God intended .. for good to accomplish ... the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

The brothers tried to get rid of Joseph and kill off the dream but the dream was bigger than them all.

God's dream - the saving of life, the bringing of life in place of death and destruction - is the real power in the story.

For "we know that in everything, God works for good with those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

So the purposes of God are the unseen, hidden power at work in this story and in every story.

Walter Brueggemann wrote the best commentary on Genesis.

Here's what he says about the story of Joseph.

"the purposes of God are at work in hidden and unnoticed ways ... (that are) reliable and will come to fruition".

It's perhaps that last bit that jumps out at us - regardless of human attitudes or actions. He actually says that "human action is declared irrelevant".

I find that reassuring. That even our mistakes won't stop the purposes of God from being fulfilled.

Even Joseph's brothers actions won't stop God's purpose, the saving of life, the bringing of life in place of death.

As the Psalms put it about Joseph, "(God) had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave" (Psalm 105:17).

Joseph's dream was to dream that God's purposes would prevail.

That there would be life in place of death.

That's the dream of God and so it's a good dream to dream.

It's a dream that is at the very heart of its all - the longing for life and love, for peace and justice, for compassion and integrity.

In other words it's the longing, that I believe everyone has, for the purposes of God to prevail.

But meantime, before that all comes to fruition, there is a battle raging.

Brueggemann puts it like this, "the battle is between the dream and the "Killers of the Dream"".

The battle is played out between Joseph and his brothers.

They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 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." (Genesis 37:19-20)

Jacob's partiality towards Joseph as the favourite son is not from God. It's only helped to fuel the anger within the family.

In opposition to that human favouritism is the word of God, which has drawn near to us, in Christ, and acts as a counter measure to human folly.

As the NT puts it, "salvation ... is within easy reach ... it is on your lips and in your heart" (Romans 10:8).

And that same word says, "there is neither Greek nor Jew, the same Lord is Lord of all" (Romans 10:12).

So there's no place for favouritism nor superiority, whether that be within a family or between races, or religions, or genders, or sexuality; for the same Lord is Lord of all.

Christ is the word made flesh, the God we trust, the same God who works all things for good, the same God through who all things are made and all things exist, the same God whose purposes will prevail, regardless of human attitude or action.

But let me say, that this God is so determined to be one with us that this God actively desires our cooperation in bringing together his purposes.

"we are co-workers in God's service" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

What Joseph's brothers meant for evil God turned to good. Chapter 37 ends not with the death of Joseph as was looking likely but with the hopeful words,

"and they took Joseph to Egypt" (Genesis 37:28).

A trip to Egypt was not on Joseph's bucket list. It wasn't what he'd planned or hoped for. But Egypt would be the next chapter in God's salvation of all nations. And Joseph would be the major player.

God's promise to Jacob, and thus to Joseph, was to go and become "many great nations".

This would be fulfilled through the unexpected exile to Egypt.

In a way, Jacob, indeed Israel, would be saved through the harmful actions of his own sons.

and by the son who would be sent into Egypt, just like the son of God would be sent into the world, in God's saving plan to bring the kingdom of love and peace to all.

This amazing ancient story makes it clear to us that in all things and at all times God is working to bring his dream to pass - life and love and peace.

Even when we don't feel it.

Even when we can't see it.