

THE FORGIVENESS OF JOSEPH

Genesis 50. 15-21

Romans 14. 1-12

Matthew 18. 21-35

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The following true story was published five years ago in *The Guardian*. It was written by a mother of three young children:

‘It had been a difficult week. David, five, and baby Ben had a nasty bug, and we had all traipsed back and forth to the doctor’s surgery several times. I was busy mopping fevered brows, washing clothes, changing beds and trying to cope with the mess. As I devoted all my attention to his brothers, three-year-old Matthew watched in silent but growing resentment. Finally, one evening he burst into tears.

“Mummy,” he sobbed, “I’m really sick.” Guiltily I hauled him on to my knee and hugged him. “You poor darling,” I soothed. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I have to go to the doctor now! I’m tired, and I’m sad, and ... and my eyebrows are sore – and my hair hurts too!” he finished triumphantly.

I stroked his hair and kissed him. “You poor boy, you’ve had a tough time,” I said, “but I think I know what’s wrong with you.”

He waited hopefully, enjoying the moment. “I think you’ve got sibling rivalry,” I said gently. For a moment he looked puzzled, then suddenly his face cleared. “Yes, I have, Mummy,” he said bravely, “and it hurts!”

Relationships between siblings in the Bible are particularly fraught, beginning with the first pair of siblings, Cain and Abel. And if we look at the subsequent founding families in the book of Genesis, starting with Abraham, we see that they are not immune to conflict either. In every generation, discord is the rule rather than the exception: Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and then Joseph and his brothers.

Very little is said about what happens between Ishmael and Isaac as adults, although some biblical interpreters suggest that they may have achieved a peace of sorts by the time their father Abraham dies, based on the verse that reads: '(Abraham's) sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah' (Gen 25. 9).

In the cases of Jacob and Esau and then between Joseph and his brothers, there are dramatic forgiveness and reconciliation scenes in which broken relationships are restored. It takes two entire chapters, Genesis 32 and 33, to describe the encounter between Jacob and Esau, decades after Jacob has stolen Esau's blessing and fled.

The reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers, years after they sold him into slavery and when Joseph has reached a high position in Egypt, unfolds over four chapters in Genesis 42 to 45. Joseph immediately recognises his brothers when they come down to Egypt to buy grain during a famine in Canaan; but before he reveals himself to them, he tests them (accusing them of being spies, imprisoning some of them, etc.). It is not until the brothers 'pass' all of the tests that Joseph finally breaks down, weeping 'so loud that the Egyptians heard it', and finally announcing: 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' (Gen 45. 2-3).

In the text immediately preceding our appointed passage in Genesis, Jacob has died and Joseph and his brothers have buried him, also in the cave of Machpelah. But there is one last issue that has been worrying Joseph's brothers. 'What if', they ask themselves, 'Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the

wrong that we did to him?’ (Gen 50.15). In other words, now that our father Jacob is dead, will Joseph change his mind? Or, now that our father is dead, will Joseph show us what he really thinks?

These are legitimate concerns on their part. After all, Joseph’s brothers had plotted to kill him and as a compromise, had sold him into slavery. Even though Joseph has done well for himself and been generous with his family up to this point, what stands in the way of taking the revenge to which he is entitled?

The brothers are a bit sheepish in returning to the issue, not quite sure how they should bring it up again after all these years. So they come up with an interesting ploy. One of the primary motivations, it seems, for Joseph to make himself known to his brothers and forgive them earlier in Genesis was his concern for his father, Jacob. ‘Is my father still alive?’ is the first thing he asked them, after all. So now the brothers come to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this instruction before he died, “Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.” Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father’ (Gen 50. 16-17).

What is interesting about this tactic is that Jacob never seems to have said any such thing to the sons, at least not in what is available to us in the text. And it is not as if Jacob didn’t have the opportunity to do so, given that his final speech to his sons (recounted in the preceding chapters of Genesis) is both lengthy and detailed.

Whether or not Jacob made this statement to his sons is, however, beside the point. The sons are clearly concerned about what will happen to them and they cite the authority that they know Joseph respects. In response, Joseph assures them, once again with much weeping on both sides, that they are indeed forgiven. Joseph addresses their concern directly, saying, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?’

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today' (Gen 50. 19-20).

Joseph's statement is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is his willingness to place his brothers' actions into the realm of God's work! Joseph recognizes that even though his brothers acted with ill intent, God used those actions for the good. This is indeed a gracious response.¹

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is a compelling challenge to all of us who have been wronged in some way and who now need to be enabled to forgive. The process of forgiveness is understandably difficult, but perhaps in some ways made easier when we remember that God's plans for us are good.²

I wonder what you think about what I am going to say. God does not have a highly detailed plan that is all worked out and that will come to fruition regardless of what humans do. The people involved – we humans – are not automatons; and our actions, be they good or evil, are not without consequence. Positively, our actions can act for good in the face of those who plan for evil. Negatively, our actions can frustrate God's intentions, so that the future may look different to what would have been the case had only God's plan been realised.

Yet, however much we humans may complicate God's planning, God's way into the future will never *finally* be stymied. God will persevere; and he will stay with his plans for our good and for our life, even though our stubbornness and failures may lead him to change the ways and means used to accomplish his goals.

¹ This forgiveness and reconciliation scene at the end of the Book of Genesis is also significant to the larger story of the great family that began with Abraham and Sarah. Despite the conflicts throughout the generations, this scene brings the family stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph to a close; with the final word being one of grace and generosity.

² Cf. Jer 29. 11-14).

God's action in our lives is often behind the scenes and inconspicuous. In the case of Joseph, God interwove the threads of goodness and mercy among the various strands of evil that Joseph encountered, particularly from his brothers. God worked toward the best possible end. God is capable of taking what evil people accomplish and drawing it into his larger purposes.

This does not mean, however, that 'evil designs and events' are included in God's plan. God intends no evil to humans. Rather, in the case of Joseph, God's plan was to bring the evil devised by Joseph's brothers 'to good effect'. In the New Testament, St Paul echoes this same thought in his letter to the Romans (8. 28), when he writes that in everything – in even the worst that evildoers may put in our way – God will draw it into his divine plans for good. He will always persist in his plans to lead us to goodness and to life.

Amen.