

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Joseph

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

Few of us would deny that the world we live in seems to be seriously out-of-whack. The natural order on which we depend appears to go feral, producing catastrophes which in a flash destroy the lives of many thousands of people. Then there's the pain and suffering produced by the human will to hurt others, or by human carelessness.

All the things that are wrong can blind us to the world's *good* order which we wake up to every morning, as well as to the comforts and pleasures we still have to enjoy. We forget to be thankful, and even question the existence of the One whose will brought the world into being. We question the age-old belief that the world has only lasted as long as it has, and is as good as it is, because the God of love is ultimately in charge of it and patiently working out his good purpose for it. That truth is embedded in the life of Joseph, the first-born of the marriage between Jacob and his beloved Rachel.

I.

The servants in the house of the Governor of Egypt stared at each other wide-eyed. He had just ordered them to leave him alone with the foreign visitors he'd been wining and dining, and now from behind the closed door came the most heart-wrenching sobs, broken only by loud wailing. What was happening? Was their master ill? Was he in danger? He was clearly in great pain.

Naturally Joseph's servants knew nothing of his deep, long-standing emotional pain. They had no idea who the visitors were who'd caused that pain to surface, taking him back to the sights and sounds of his past. The young boy, constantly taunted by ten older brothers, paying him back for being his father's favourite; the comfort he knew his father would always give him only serving make things worse; the dreams, so vivid he felt he had to share them, arousing much anger when he did, even to the point of drawing a rebuke from his father.

Yet their meaning was so clear - that for now he might have to endure his older brothers' scorn, but one day his whole family would acknowledge their dependence on him. In a way, his father already acknowledged his importance. Hadn't he given to him that very expensive coat with all its bright colours? He was, after all, the first-born of Rachel, the only wife Jacob truly loved. And always to be relied on to protect his younger brother Benjamin, dear to his father's heart since Rachel had died giving birth to him.

Joseph had been wearing that coat on the day forever etched in his memory. His father had sent him to find his older brothers, and he'd finally come upon them in the fields of Dothan. Joseph hadn't expected a warm welcome from them, but neither had he expected to be threatened and jostled, stripped of his coat, then dragged to a nearby well and roughly lowered into its depths. Their grinning, jeering faces had betrayed a murderous hatred which had really shocked him. For the first time in all his seventeen years he'd realized

what their envy of him could lead to. In the hours that followed there was one thread of hope he clung to. Reuben had not been with them. Wherever he'd gone, Joseph knew they'd wait for him to return. He knew that Reuben as the eldest would not want Joseph's blood on his hands.

But Reuben had not returned when the light above Joseph was blocked by his brothers looking down at him. They must have come to their senses – they were lowering a rope. Within a minute he was up and out in the open air. But his relief was short-lived. Absolute horror gripped him as his brothers bound his hands securely, and he saw some men standing a way off under some palms. With their camels laden with goods he recognized them instantly as Ishmaelite traders heading south to the markets of Egypt. His brothers were actually going to sell him – to strangers. He'd begun to plead with them to have pity, but in an instant and without a word, they'd handed him over, they were standing there counting their money, and the camel train was in motion.

II.

Young Joseph had had plenty of time to reflect on the long, terrifying journey to Egypt. Cruelly betrayed by his own brothers for twenty pieces of silver, he was at the mercy of total strangers, cut off from the father who loved him, headed for a fate worse than death as a slave in a foreign land. Jacob had always taught him to believe in God and trust him to be his protector – his Shield against all evil, the Rock in whose shadow he could shelter from life's storms. But where was God now, when Joseph needed him most?

The thing was that somehow, through the long years that followed, God had become for Joseph the one light in all the darkness. As a slave in the household of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, Joseph was successful in all he did. So much so, that Potiphar entrusted him with the care of everything he owned, and acknowledged that Jehovah, the God of Joseph's fathers, was with him.

Joseph had always remained conscious that, however difficult his circumstances might be, he was still answerable to God for his every attitude and action. So when Potiphar's wife had tried to get him into bed with her, he'd said, "How can I do such a thing and sin against God?" She hadn't given up, however, and in her frustration had finally turned on him. He remembered as if it were yesterday the overwhelming horror he'd felt when she'd falsely accused him of trying to sleep with her. She'd even possessed a compelling piece of evidence – his robe which she'd torn off him as he'd fled from her. But even when a very angry Potiphar had him thrown into prison, the Lord was still with him. He'd become the warden's favourite, even to the point where the running of the prison had virtually been left in his hands. But in all his success Joseph had never forgotten that without God he could do nothing – that it was, for instance, God who'd revealed to him the meaning of the dreams he'd been called upon to explain.

His successful interpreting of Pharaoh's servants' dreams had led to the change in his fortunes. He'd endured two more years in prison, but finally he'd been released - into the very presence of Pharaoh himself, who'd been troubled by dreams no one could explain, about fat cows eating up thin cows and fat ears of wheat eating up thin ears. To Joseph both dreams had sounded the same warning: years of plenty would be followed by years of famine. He hadn't stopped there. He'd gone on to suggest to Pharaoh how he could heed the warning, with the astonishing result that he'd been put in charge, not only of that operation, but of the whole of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. Surely the God of Joseph's fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, was faithful. Whatever humankind in their twistedness might do, however bleak Joseph's life might be, God was still in charge, working out his good purpose.

III.

So Joseph, as Pharaoh's right-hand man, had organized the storing of food for the seven years of bumper crops, and the sale of that food during the drought that had followed. And from far and wide people had come to buy, including Joseph's ten brothers from Canaan.

Brought before him, they'd bowed down, their faces to the ground. Understandably they had no idea who he was, but he had recognized them, and seen immediately that his younger brother wasn't with them. Having established that his father was alive and well, he knew he had to get Benjamin to Egypt – to see him, of course, but also to see if the years had changed his brothers – or whether they were still the people who'd so cruelly sold him into slavery. He could test that by seeing if they'd be ready to protect their youngest brother at the risk of their own lives. So, knowing the drought would eventually force them back, he'd told them not to re-appear without Benjamin. And in the course of time they had turned up – with him – and Joseph had arranged for his life to be under threat. But this time the brothers' concern had *not* been primarily for themselves, but for Benjamin, and for how his death would bring their father to the grave.

Perhaps it was overwhelming sorrow at the memories of his own despair, perhaps it was hearing his brothers admit to the wrong they'd done, but when they refused to abandon Benjamin, Joseph was deeply moved. So much so, his whole household heard the sound of his weeping, as he made himself known to them. Even at that moment God was at the centre of all he was thinking and feeling. He said to his brothers, "Don't be distressed, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there's been famine in the land, and for the next five years there'll be no ploughing or reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it wasn't you who sent me here, but God."

To say what Joseph said as he tried to reassure his brothers takes an unswerving faith that God's power and goodness and love shine on, in spite of this world's evil. He said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what's now being done, the saving of many lives."

Still today those words resonate with people who've suffered at the hands of others, yet somehow keep on trusting that God is ultimately in control, working all things together for the good of those who love him. Perhaps Jesus remembered Joseph's words, as he hung, dying on a Roman cross, asking God the Father to forgive those who'd put him there. The good which God intended through that unspeakably awful act was the saving of many lives. To use Jesus' own words, he gave his life to be the ransom-price that would set many free. He bought for anyone who wants it the greatest freedom – freedom from the self-centredness which infects us all and causes so much misery.

Conclusion

Joseph endured years of pain and humiliation, because his brothers envied him. But in God's plan and by God's sovereign power Joseph became their Saviour from certain death. He also became the Lord to whom they bowed. In all that, Joseph foreshadowed what God would do in the person of Jesus. Through his humiliation and suffering he's become the Saviour of all who believe he alone can rescue us from being cut off from God. In doing that, he became the Lord, to whom every knee shall bow.

God our Father, we marvel at the many ways you prepared the world for your appearing in the person of Jesus - for the way rescuing Joseph's family from death foreshadowed what you'd do for a world in dire need. Thank you for all Jesus willingly endured to save us from being cut off from you, our Source of life. And help us to bow to him as Lord of all. Amen