

Reflection

Genesis 45:1-15

It has been more than a few weeks since we last focused on the Old Testament reading and a lot has happened in the plot of the story. Not all of it was included in the lectionary readings. Our last focus on the Old Testament was a midrash (traditional Jewish interpretation) on the story of the binding of Isaac and subsequent marriage to Rebecca.

We heard of the struggle between Rebecca's two children, a struggle that started before birth and continued into adulthood. The story was of one child who was chosen and another who was rejected. It was not the first time we hear of this in the family tree. Isaac himself had been the chosen one at the expense of Ishmael and his later half-brothers. One was chosen and the rest were rejected. In each case, the chosen one was not the one whom society expected – the oldest surviving son – but a younger brother.

This choosing of one child, as we now know, does not set up good family relationships, nor does it model good parenting. There is little wonder that we see this repeated as an intergenerational pattern in the lives of Abraham's family – one child is chosen and the rest are rejected.

The story continues with Jacob fleeing his brother Esau's wrath at having been cheated out of his inheritance. Jacob flees to his uncle where he is integrated into his wider family, but the issues continue, so they probably did not start with Abraham. Laban cheats Jacob out of his choice of wife and therefore gets a much longer term of labour from him. Jacob, in return, manages to build up his wealth at the expense of his uncle. He does not return to the Promised Land seeking the fulfilment of the promise. He, and his family, return to escape the anger of his uncle. Although there is reconciliation with Laban, and later Esau, it is clear from Joseph's story that he has not learnt from his family's mistakes.

And so, we get to the story of Joseph. Joseph was a favourite son because for a long time he was the only son of his father's favourite wife. In last week's story we heard two anecdotes that showed the favouritism he received – he was given rich clothes and he was kept safely at home when his brothers went out to work hard. To make matters worse, he has dreams of his family bowing down to him. Then he brings a bad report about the behaviour of his brothers. It did not set things up for good family relationship.

The brothers deal with the problem in the way their family has always done – they get rid of it. Remove the unwanted one and let everything else sort itself out. Who knows if it is a sudden attack of conscience or fear of reprisals that makes them decide to sell Joseph instead of killing him. Joseph, sold as a slave and then thrown into prison, has plenty of opportunity to plan his revenge on his brothers ... and then he gets the chance when he is a person of power and his brothers, albeit unknowingly, are asking for sustenance to save their lives. What will Joseph do?

Joseph sets up the brothers, he accuses them of being spies, he even keeps one brother captive as he sends the rest home. We even see the continued

favouritism of Rachel's sons because young Benjamin is not sent to Egypt on that first trip. Imagine what Simeon felt when he was left behind to moulder in a prison cell. The only thing in his favour was that there was food in his land, unlike his brothers returning home. Up to this point, the only person who appears to be compassionate is Joseph's steward who, not knowing the relationship between the brothers and Joseph, reassures them that everything will be OK.

That is a bit of a turn around. There are only four mentions of God in Joseph's story – twice when interpreting dreams, once when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and this steward, who is not one of the "chosen." We are reminded that we can encounter the compassion of God in the most unlikely places, including through those who do not recognise God.

But as Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he also communicates an important message – this stops with me. He could choose, as his great-grandfather and grandfather had done, to continue the separations happening in each generation of his family. Given the treatment of his brothers, and his subsequent rise to power, no one would blame him for doing so. Instead, he works towards reconciliation with his brothers.

His words of reassurance could be interpreted as saying that God caused the suffering for a greater purpose, but this understanding creates a problematic understanding of God. Was God complicit in selling Joseph – and others – to slavery for a "greater good?" What about later events, such as the Holocaust, or genocide against our own First Nations? Can we say God caused them, as would be consistent with this understanding? What sort of God would do that? – a god that would be feared rather than loved.

Instead, we can say that Joseph was open to God's possibilities from his experiences – perhaps sometimes at the time, but more likely with the years of hindsight. And it was through openness to these possibilities that at some point – even possibly right at the end of this story – Joseph decides that instead of getting revenge and separating another generation of brothers, he will work towards reconciliation. No one would have blamed him for his revenge, but instead he made the decision this splitting of the family would stop with him.

I wonder what it is in our lives that, whether we understand ourselves a victim or perpetrator, (or more likely a mixture of both) we need to make that same conscious decision – it stops with me. What is it that we need to do in order to reduce the chances of this problem continuing on for another generation? What supports do you need to make that change?

Right at the end of Joseph's story we see the results of this change on his father. The dying Jacob blesses both of Joseph's sons and does so equally between the two boys. Joseph made sure the intergenerational conflict stopped with him – and the effect flowed on to the rest of his family.