

God's dream for our lives (Gn 37.1-11; Joel 2.25-30a)

If I said I was going to talk about **Mary and Joseph** today you would think I was referring to Jesus' earthly parents who encouraged and respected Jesus, even when his behaviour was puzzling and exasperating at times.

But no, for those of us who like to celebrate the saints' days in the church calendar, the Mary we remember today is **Mary Magdalene**. In John's Gospel our Lord appeared to Mary Magdalene alone after Simon Peter and the other disciple left the empty tomb. She did as Jesus told her and went to the other disciples with the news: *"I have seen the Lord!"* (Jn 20.18).

The Joseph we are thinking about this morning, as part of a new sermon series, is not the carpenter in Nazareth but the spoilt **lad in Genesis**. Comparing Jacob's family with that of Mary and Joseph is rather like chalk and cheese.

Listen to this **description**: *"a family in which conflict, misbehaviour, and often child neglect or abuse on the part of individual parents occur continually and regularly, leading other members to accommodate such actions. Children sometimes grow up in such families with the understanding that such an arrangement is normal"*. What do you think I Googled to come up with that definition?

A dysfunctional family. I hope that's not too near the bone for anyone, as I'm sure that family life has been difficult and far from ideal for some people here.

Joseph was part of just such a dysfunctional family. Genesis chapters 37-50 (the third section of Genesis) are known as the **"Joseph cycle"**, but described as *the account of Jacob's family line* (37.2). They deal not just with Joseph but all of Jacob's sons, all blessed by their father (Genesis 49). So at the start of our series, we need to set the family scene, even before today's passage about the rift between the brothers.

The tension between the sons and their father Jacob begins in **chapters 34 & 35**. Take a deep breath, for in potted summary form, it goes something like this: Jacob did absolutely nothing (34.5) on hearing of the rape of Reuben's sister, Dinah. That led to Jacob's second and third sons, Simeon and Levi, committing a

major slaughter (34.25) in revenge. **Jacob's feeble response** only increased his firstborn's contempt for his Dad: Reuben was bold enough to sleep with Jacob's concubine Bilhah (35.22). He was probably seeking not only to usurp his father's authority but also to prevent Rachel's maid from becoming the new favourite wife, ahead of his own mother, Leah, who was unloved (Gn 29.31). Dan and Naphtali, Bilhah's sons must have been outraged by their half-brother's behaviour. That all set up **tension between the six sons of Leah and Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of Rachel** (along with the four sons of their respective maids) as well as with their **ominously unresponsive father**. Jacob's puzzling failure to respond to the outrageous conduct of Reuben was a **catalyst for further trouble**.

Confused? Not to worry. I'm sure we've all got the idea that we are dealing over the next few weeks with a dysfunctional family, divided by rivalries and hatreds, and headed by a man who seemed either unaware of the tensions or so defeated by the task of managing his troubled and potentially violent brood that he **ignored the problems**. Dysfunctional families (like dysfunctional governments!) think nothing of indulging in underhand behaviour.

Now for today's passage. **Chapter 37**, which we shall also be looking at next week, concentrates on the rift between the brothers themselves as the hidden tensions and rivalries in Jacob's family surfaced. Singling out one of the younger and more vulnerable sons for **special treatment** (37.3) was unwise though, since Joseph was the son of Jacob's favourite wife Rachel.

In a way it was history repeating itself, as Isaac also favoured Esau over Jacob but was tricked into blessing Jacob (*Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob*, Gn 25.28). I hope you will allow me a digression about **favouritism** here, for two reasons

- Favouritism was part and parcel of both Isaac and Jacob's parenting
- I can't remember ever hearing any reference to favouritism in a sermon. Can you? Well, there's always a first time!

Favouritism brings many potential problems and challenges for Christians, especially for parents, grandparents and teachers:

- Favouritism causes conflict and disunity within the family as in the case of both Isaac and Jacob's offspring

- The conflict can so easily lead to resentment. Who can remember being in a class with an insufferable “teacher’s pet”?
- Favouritism may cause egotistical ideals, especially in the favoured child. The child may think that the world adores him or her, just like parents do, and therefore may think anything goes, in school or workplace. Joseph was portrayed as a self-obsessed and callow youth whose world revolved around himself – some of you may know teenagers like that!
- The flip side of the coin is that favouritism may cause low self-esteem in the siblings. They might start to think and believe that they are lesser beings. It is not the case in today’s passage but can easily occur in families where the son is favoured over his sisters.
- Favouritism may cause an unhealthy state of mind, with unrealistic goals and dreams, which can be shattered with the hard knocks in life, although as we shall see God was on Joseph’s side whenever he was harshly treated.
- Favouritism can so easily lead to poor behaviour on the part of the favoured one, followed by a destructive response from the unfavoured. Esau wanted to kill his brother Jacob (Gn 27:41). Next week we shall hear how Jacob’s sons plotted to kill Joseph (Gn 37.18).

And that’s exactly what happened here. Joseph didn’t help the situation but played his own **rôle in the deterioration of family bonds**, starting by *giving a bad report* (37.2) of his brothers. We don’t know what this report involved, but apparently the Hebrew term is always used in a negative sense. Put like that, it characterises Joseph as somewhat immature, like a tell-tale, rather than highlighting the brothers’ naughtiness.

The **dreams didn’t help**. Oddly, the first pair of dreams featured in today’s passage is the only one with no mention of God. So were all the dreams from God? (after all, they all came true). And what about Joseph’s interpretation of them? Dreams were commonly viewed in the Ancient Near East as divine revelations, so they would be significant events in Joseph’s life.

Unfortunately, Joseph blithely ignored the hatred resulting from his favoured status and his readiness to share the dreams with his family **made a bad situation worse**. Perhaps he imagined that this father would share his excitement at the prospect of his future exaltation over his relatives. At best, it showed naivety on

Joseph's part about the situation brewing with his brothers. At worst, it suggested a sort of spiritual pride regarding God speaking into his life.

In any case, Joseph's unwise action only **added to the brothers' hatred** (*they hated him all the more*, (37.5,8)). Tolerance is needed in such situations but that was a quality in short supply among Jacob's sons. Marked out by his *ornate robe* (37.3) and his claims for himself, Joseph was a nail his *jealous* (37.11) brothers would delight in hammering flat.

The brothers' response (37.8) was akin to pulling rank when they asked just who this younger brother was who would rule over them. After the second of the pair of dreams, Joseph brought his father into the loop (37.12) and succeeded in **uniting his family – but in hatred for him, rather than love**. No wonder *his father kept the matter in mind* (37.11).

The Old Testament Joseph who infuriated his brothers with his dreams doesn't seem to have been warned about the **dangers that lay in store for him**. If he had any foreboding about what lay ahead, he did nothing to prevent it from happening. In contrast, "*An angel of the Lord*" appeared to the New Testament Joseph in a dream and warned him of **Herod's murderous plotting** (Mt. 2.13).

So **what can we learn** from today's readings?

Divisions within families and communities are nothing new. The worst thing that can be done is to ignore them and hope they will go away. The church is one large family, so if there are rifts between different cliques or splinter groups they mustn't be ignored either.

So **how do we deal with the people we find irritating**, self-opinionated and "full of themselves"? Do we seek to discern what is lovable in them? If we challenge them, do we do so gently, seeking to encourage in them a greater maturity and self-understanding?

Functional families, and that includes the church, encourage and respect one another. Being considerate of each other is the tie that binds us together, perhaps almost as much as love.

The book of Joel contains a well-known verse: *Your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions* (2.28). Have we, mostly older men and women, ever stopped, I wonder, to consider **God's dream for our lives?**

Of two things we can be certain:

- **God must be sorely grieved** by any hints of dysfunctional Christian fellowships anywhere within his Church family. He wants to see love and respect shown by all his children everywhere.
- **God shows no favouritism** but loves everyone equally and wants to bless us all. He would love us all to be able to echo Mary Magdalene's words "*I have seen the Lord!*"