

Behind the Waterfall – Dysfunctional Families

Genesis 37:1-28/36 – Galatians 5:22-23

In 1983 John Cleese and Robin Skynner wrote a best-selling book called “Families and how to survive them.” The title struck a chord with millions worldwide. Novelist Sue Grafton said, “People talk about “dysfunctional” families; I’ve never seen any other kind.” Meanwhile, a church leader friend of mine says the most useful book for him in that position is one subtitled, “Family process in Church and Synagogue”. Family dynamics surface everywhere, with a range of people taking on parental, child and sibling roles. And therefore it’s encouraging to see God working with with family rivalries, jealousy, unfairness, anger – the whole range of difficulties - from the very start.

With this theme we could be looking at almost any period of Old Testament history, but one of the clearest stories is that of Joseph – so I want to look at Genesis 37. First of all: the characters – who these people were; Second: the responses – how they dealt with the challenges they faced; Third: “whose story is it anyway”? Finally: How can we both learn and grow?

The Main Character

So who are the main characters in this story?

Number One is **Jacob** - ruled by folly, defeated by deceit. His own childhood story was one of twin brothers – Jacob and Esau – with Jacob suffering his father's favouritism for the first born, (Gen. 25:28). Through fear Jacob then deceived his father and tricked Esau out of his birthright (Gen. 27), by killing a goat and disguising himself with its skin. At the end of our reading Jacob's own sons deceive him by killing a goat and dipping Joseph's robe in its blood (v.31) Like his father, Jacob loved one wife more than the others and made Rachel's his favourite son. (v.3) The ways he inherited were those he passed on, and they had repercussions on all around him.

Then there were the **Brothers** - ruled by resentment, defeated by shame. Notice the word "hate" used three times in five verses (vv.4,5,8). They're so consumed that they can't speak a kind word to Joseph (v.4). They're enraged by his dreams and their subsequent shameful acts will haunt them for two decades.

Finally, there's **Joseph** - ruled by vanity, defeated by isolation. He loved to be the loved one. In v.2 he tells tales on his brothers, enhancing his own position. His dreams are recounted gloatingly, and his special coat worn tactlessly, (v.22). Joseph craved the love lavished by Jacob, but failed to make friends with his brothers. He thought he didn't need them but he couldn't see beyond himself.

This was not an easy family to be part of. Have you seen any flicker of yourself yet?

Family Handling

Let's look a bit closer at how the family handled their difficulties. Just imagine you have someone like Joseph in your family – the favoured younger child whose disturbing dreams suddenly give him enormous power. Let's look at some of the responses here.

One: **be paralysed by it**. Jacob gives his son a telling off, but then does nothing. V.11 says he “**kept the matter in mind**” but that's all. I do that. Often I don't know what to do about something so I just do nothing. It *can* be positive reflection and holding, but sometimes it's nothing more than brooding.

Two: **be twisted by it**. The brothers' jealousy is even stronger than their hatred. The Hebrew word translated here as “jealous” often goes before violent action. They can't talk openly about Joseph's dream-sharing. They can't rubbish it because everyone realises that he does have an ominous prescience. But neither can they endorse it because it refers to their humiliation. So it goes underground within them, and gnaws away.

Three: **Kill it**: That's what they talk about in v.20, and it's the most extreme form of denial. The Hebrew word for “dreamer” means one empowered with prophetic insight, however. If they kill Joseph his dreams can't come true, which will also prove him to be deluded. But this is extreme behaviour and it shows how damaged the family communication already is.

Four: **Hide it**: First of all the brothers think of throwing Joseph into a cistern (v.22); then they talk about killing him and covering up the deed (v.26) finally they decide to sell him so that he's taken far away, (v.31) All the time they're trying to hide a difficult fact so that they don't have to deal with it. And we do the same with unresolved relationship matters; difficult-to-pay-back loans; powerful emotions; scary memories. But all this ever does is to mask the problem.

This family had a very difficult issue to face and they weren't doing very well. But then, nor did they have a good start: as I said earlier, jealousy and fear had already ruled them for generations.

Whose Story is it Anyway?

But whose story is it? The Bible is God's story but these family members are so occupied with their own stories that they can't see it.

Jacob represents the **intergenerational story** – the influences that can't be broken. Brought up with favouritism, jealousy and deceit he allows these themes to be masters of his own house. He can't see the bigger picture because he's dominated by received patterns.

The brothers represent the **urgent story** – they're stuck in the present, holding off the future, trying to annihilate it. They're frantic with activity but guided by folly. They can't see the bigger picture because they're dominated by fear.

Joseph represents the **latecomer's story** – his name actually means “addition”. People new to a group or family situation can be an unsettling factor – be they younger children or new in-laws. They sometimes jostle to find their place – maybe you've direct experience of this – and sometimes they hit upon something that gives them easy and sudden leverage. And that's what Joseph did with his dreams. Joseph landed on those brother as an unwelcome guest; so they piled their hatred upon him.

And what about **God's story**? Though barely mentioned, his hand is strongly implied. The gift of Joseph's dream in v.5 marks his presence early on. The fact that Reuben acts among the brothers to preserve Joseph's life is another silent indicator of God's intermingling. Then as the chapter closes we hear that Joseph was sold onto an official in the royal household: something's telling us there's more of this story to come. And why is there more? Because God has a bigger picture.

What can we learn from this dysfunctional family? Friedrich Nietzsche said *“Family love is messy, clinging, and of an annoying and repetitive pattern, like bad wallpaper.”* So is that it? Is there any hope?

Hope & the Bigger Picture

There *is* hope – if we start with that bigger picture: God's story. When we're caught up in family difficulties, we all too quickly become preoccupied with attention-grabbing foreground. We need to look at the *background* – right back to the story of God. We can't always see it clearly of course, and we don't know how it'll evolve, but it's there for us to *trust*.

God actually *chose* to be involved with the likes of Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. And today God actually chooses to be involved with us – our families, our work teams, our churches, and even the Anglican Communion. That gives great confidence that he will bring purpose and meaning out of so much pain.

Seeing the bigger God picture gives hope and confidence; seeing the bigger family picture enables strategy and skill. If only Joseph and his brothers had understood the dynamics that seem so clear to an outsider – but it's hard when you're closely embattled. The lesson here is to try and step back – and often talking with a friend or counsellor can help. Once we begin to understand why people – including ourselves - behave as they do, we can formulate our responses more intelligently.

Fruit of the Spirit

But I want to finish by offering a spiritual exercise. In Galatians 5 Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit. Imagine if this fruit had been more in evidence within Jacob's family. Perhaps it could be helpful in your family dynamic – whether it plays out in the home, the extended family, the workplace, or wherever. So I'm going to run through this fruit and suggest how it might make a difference, and then I'd like to invite you, as we move to the closing worship, to ask God, “nourish me with ...” and name the fruit.

Love: It's obvious. You don't need to make excuses for people, but you can actively seek to replace hate with love – not only for others, but yourself.

Joy: family difficulties often lead us to dissociate ourselves from the others, but there are good things to find, aspects of our families we can embrace with joy. Ask God to help you see them.

Peace: peace doesn't mean denying the truth; but it does require a commitment to ceasefire, and the establishment of quietened minds in which trust can be built.

Patience: it's not the same as doing nothing. Patience waits expectantly for change, and so patience is best rooted in faithful prayer.

Kindness: where families are difficult, usually everyone is in pain. Therefore let kindness guide your words and actions.

Goodness: it's not about being holier than thou, but rather building in things of real value – attitudes, deeds, thoughts that you and others involved can be proud to leave as a legacy.

Faithfulness: it's hard to be faithful to a hurtful family; but in a family we belong together.

Gentleness: the family doesn't depend only – or even mostly - on you. Be gentle with yourself and you'll have more resources to be gentle with others.

Self-control: Don't we all just need it!