

## SYNOD SERMON - DIOCESE OF TASMANIA 2006

### LIFE OF JOSEPH

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*'You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good, in order to preserve a people, as he is doing today.'* Genesis 50:20

A number of years ago, Allister and I were in leadership in a church outside the Anglican Communion. We ran the church's major ministry, and it was a full time job for us, and during the first few years, we had a very fruitful time of it! Vibrant growth whichever way you looked, warm fellowship, plenty of encouragement and the sure knowledge that God was with us and surely, this was what the Christian walk was meant to be like! Victory on every side! Then, quite suddenly, things changed. Issues arose. We were no longer 'the flavour of the month', and the going was very, very tough. Finally, we escaped with the clothes on our backs, our integrity intact, and our three children relatively unscathed.

We walked a lot of beaches in those days, and we said to God, 'Why? What happened?' The pain was excruciating. I wonder if you've felt like that at times. It's like the bottom's fallen out of what you thought was an on-going, predictable relationship with God. Suddenly, circumstances just plough you under. It's devastating. I found that the life of Joseph helped me. I trust it might help you, too.

I want to examine the process that took Joseph from a self-centred little know-all kid in chapter 37 of Genesis, to a gracious, forgiving and generous man in chapter 50 who was able to say to his brothers, 'You meant it for evil; God meant it for good, so that many people should be kept alive.'

You all know the story. Some of you have probably preached on it more times than I've had hot dinners! But what happened during those thirteen years? How did this amazing transformation in Joseph occur? Through many seminars, tapes and conferences? No. More like: through many dangers, toils and snares.

Consider Joseph at seventeen: probably a lot like a typical boy in my grade nine science class; very bright, articulate, confident, taking far too much initiative for his own safety, and with the firm conviction that the world revolves around him! He doesn't even have the sense to be quiet about his dreams in front of his brothers! So the next thing that happens is that he ends up in a pit, with his brothers looking down at him! Have you ever noticed that this was the exact opposite of the dream? In the dream, his brothers were bowing down to him; the reality here is that he's looking up at them from the bottom of the pit – he's the one in captivity here!

Things had really gone pear-shaped and that happens to us sometimes in ministry, doesn't it? That feeling of panic as everything slips out of control and the very opposite of all that we've planned for with God is what actually happens! It's the worst-case scenario. It may be because of our own mistakes and failures, or perhaps it's a series of circumstances that just couldn't be helped.

So what do we do? We yell: 'Oh God, get me out of this, please help me, fix me up, please!!' All we want is deliverance, *right now*, 'quick, get the prayer group to tell God to *fix it!*'

But it may be God saying, 'Hey, I've been planning this for a while, I'm not getting you out of it! That'd be a waste of a perfectly good learning situation! Now hold on to me and we'll get through it together.' Think of Jesus at Gethsemane: 'Now is my soul troubled, what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this purpose that I was brought to this hour. Father, glorify your name!' God wants us to get to that point where we're able to say: 'God meant that for good'.

Joseph goes down to Egypt with the Ishmaelites, is sold as a slave and ends up in Potiphar's house. It's a long, hard slog, those years in Potiphar's house. Joseph has to learn a new language and a new culture in the context of his new job; that of a slave. But he does it well, is favoured and gets ahead. That's all covered in just a few verses of Genesis 39. [Someone once said it was a good thing the bible was written by men: if it had been written by women, it would have been a 30-volume set, with all the details added!] But you can't tell me that Joseph didn't have to spend a long time processing the reality that he'd been abandoned and betrayed by those he thought he could trust the most.

That feeling of betrayal, of being 'wounded in the house of our friends', is something we must go through. It's part of the process. It makes us better ministers of the gospel because if we've got any sense we'll come running to God with our grief and anguish. As our own hearts are broken, we'll learn to be more effective ministers to the broken hearted. Of course, we also have the option of closing up and becoming bitter about it; but that's a risk God takes when He sets it up. And we need to be able to say: 'God meant that for my good.'

And then there are the incidental temptations that come our way. In Joseph's case, it was Potiphar's wife. And let's face it, here's quite some scenario. There is Joseph, miles from home, abandoned by his family, literally slaving away, starting to get ahead, and suddenly, there she is, an attractive woman, and in a society that may have condoned such behaviour if carried out discreetly. Could you blame Joseph if he'd said, 'Why not? Why on earth not?' But look at his response: 'How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' You see, he was still tied to God in the process he was going through. God was still there.

God is still there with us in the times when we are tempted, when we want to say 'Why not?' 'No-one needs to know ...'. We all face these times (unless we're already dead!). God will just take us around the mountain again, and again, until we conquer that thing, and side with God against it, and move on.

In any kind of church leadership, in any denomination, leaders are subtly encouraged, aren't they, to give the impression that weaknesses are things they *used* to have; that sinning was something they *used* to do; and as for needs, well, no, 'Actually I'm here to meet the needs of my people. I don't have any needs myself.' Because: 'of course, I'm a minister, I'm totally together and my life is right on track.'

But we know that we have to make an effort to be accountable to others. This doesn't come easily to us.

Do we have someone to pray with?

Someone who really knows our hearts?

Someone who shares our deepest and darkest thoughts, our fears and sorrows, our bad attitudes, our stupid mistakes, and loves us anyway?

Church leaders often have difficulty in finding someone like that; but they're out there. A faithful and discreet friend is a treasure; hold on to them!

Poor Joseph! After doing the right thing and running from temptation he has to go through more hard labour! And this time in gaol and with his reputation shattered: they all think he's a rapist! Can you believe it? It's harder this time around, and as a 'reward' for godly conduct! Why? Because there's a process, a journey, underway here.

CS Lewis, in his children's book The Horse and His Boy, describes a scene of crisis where the main characters are chased by a lion. They just escape, absolutely exhausted, and although everyone else is rested and fed, Shasta is told to run as fast as he can to warn the king of danger. He quietly seethes with the unfairness of it all. But Lewis says: '*Shasta had not yet learned that if you do one good deed, your reward usually is to be set to do another and harder and better one.*' And that's God's way, isn't it? – until He gets us to the point where we can say of our circumstances: 'God meant them for good.'

We know the rest of the story – Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph's interpretation, second-in-command to Pharaoh, famine kicks in and one day in come his brothers and bow down to him. Joseph has at last inherited the outworking of the dream God placed in his heart thirteen years before!

The success of his journey with God lies in the fact that Joseph was able, and willing, to provide for the very ones who had betrayed and wounded him. His heart by now was so soft, so open, so tender, and so generous towards his brothers that he was prepared to provide for them and to risk being hurt by them

again. There's no wariness, no suspicion in his heart, just a willingness to bless, forgive and to relate. Joseph has a clear vision of the hand of God behind the whole series of events, and he is able to say, 'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good . . . in order to keep many alive'.

Last point: God's main and major agenda with us is relational. God is a relater first and foremost. At Calvary, Jesus paid the enormous, ultimate price, in order to get the Temple curtain torn in two that there might no longer be division, that we might have intimate and unbroken fellowship with God, and fellowship with each other in Him. God is a relater: our relationships with him and with each other are more important to him than the success of our programmes or the size of our parishes or the state of our budgets.

We've been presented with Bishop John's 'transforming*life*' document, and it's great. But if we're honest, we'll admit that it's no good attempting to transform our parishes, our diocese or the world; unless our own hearts have been transformed like Joseph's.

Let's keep short accounts with God and with each other, and let's be transparent in our relationships.

Let's let God organise our circumstances and trust him even in the pear-shaped situations.

Let's clear the air in working relationships that may have stalled along the way. And above all, as Bishop John says, 'We need to keep barracking for one other!'

A caterpillar crawls around just surviving, just eating, not much to look at, not attractive. But while it's in that cocoon did you know that all its internal organs dissolve completely into mush and are re-formed into a butterfly's organs? Then out it comes, a difficult process, and there it is, beautiful, graceful, ready to fly. And that's the best picture of transformation I can give you.

Where is your life, your parish, in this continuum? Maybe still crawling around like a caterpillar, or perhaps you feel like things are dissolving around you, and you're restricted in a cocoon. Perhaps you see flashes of the beauty of a butterfly, in what's going on in you and around you. Do you feel like Joseph, perhaps, and can see a little of what God's doing? Perhaps you feel more like Job, and can't see a foot in front of your nose! However, whatever you *do* feel; whatever you *do* see; the glorious truth is that God remains committed to totally transforming your heart, your parish. God's relationship with you is his very highest priority. And of every circumstance, we can confidently say, 'This may seem an impossible situation, but God means it for my good!'

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