

Armagh Baptist Church – Sunday 4th February 2012 – 11:00am

'Joseph: Prince of Egypt'

5. Joseph in Prison

Genesis ch.40:1-23

Introduction

One of the songs in Andrew Lloyd Webber's production of '*Joseph and his amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*' is called: '*Any Dream will do.*'

That was also the title given to the Reality TV Show that looked for someone to play the part of Joseph in a West End Musical, a few years ago, when Lee Mead was the winner.

'Any Dream will do' does sum up one aspect of the life of Joseph. Dreams played a big part in the Biblical story of Joseph, the son of Jacob.

You remember away back in Genesis 37, that no sooner had Jacob given his favourite son his coat of many colours, than Joseph began to have dreams about his future. His brothers might have written them off as Joseph's own delusions of grandeur, but they were in fact dreams that were given by God.

Now in Genesis ch.40 we are going to see Joseph being able to interpret two more dreams – dreams that had been given to two of Pharaoh's officials: the cup-bearer and the baker. For the first time we see Joseph being able, not just to dream dreams, but to interpret dreams, too.

And in the next chapter, Genesis ch.41, we will actually see Joseph being summoned out of the prison in order to interpret two more dreams – this time for the most important man in the country, in fact for the most powerful man in the whole world at that time – for Pharaoh, King of Egypt, himself!

So dreams played a big part in the story of Joseph, and in his rise to power.

I hope you remember me saying that dreams in Genesis are actually God's revelation to men. We have to keep reminding ourselves that we are looking at a period of world history here, which took place before the Bible had started to be written, before God had inspired his Written Word, the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament Scriptures, to be written down.

Moses was the writer of the first 5 books of the Bible, but he wasn't born yet. It would be another 400 years before Moses would begin to 'put quill to parchment' under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to record for us and for all posterity: how this world came into being (Genesis 1-3); how this world came to be judged by a universal Flood (Genesis 4-9); how this world began to divide up into different nations and language groups (Genesis 10-11); how God began to call out a people for himself, when he called Abram & Sarai out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and began to lead them to the Promised Land of Canaan (Gen.12); And how from that one man (and he as good as dead) came the Nation of Israel, through his descendants: Isaac, not Ishmael;

Jacob, not Esau; and how Judah became the ancestor of the Messiah, not Joseph (Genesis 13-50).

The book that we have been spending the last couple of years studying, the Book of Genesis, was written 400 years after the events contained in it had passed into history. The only other Bible book that dates from this period is the Book of Job, but it doesn't refer to Abram, Isaac, Jacob or Joseph.

So God was only beginning to inspire his Word to be written down. Up until that time he often spoke to men and women through dreams. So these dreams, recorded for us as part of the Life of Joseph, are God's way of speaking into the lives of men and women, revealing His Will to them, and usually revealing something that was going to happen to them in the future.

Maybe you still have dreams today? I shared a couple of weird dreams with you that I had over the Christmas holidays. But you know, some of the best dreams I've ever had were when I was wide awake! God still gives us dreams and visions today, of what he wants us to do with our lives, but we must be careful not to give them the same weight as God's written Word, the Bible. Only the 66 books of the Bible are inspired by God, with His authority!

When I was still living in Portadown in 1989-90, just starting out in Christian ministry, God gave me a Vision to see a line of evangelical churches planted from Enniskillen to Athlone. I wrote it down in my diary away back then, and jotted down some of the towns along the N55 road down the centre of Ireland. That was long before I was ever introduced to church-planting work in Cavan, and before I went to pastor Mullaghmeen (near Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh) as my first church. God had given me an idea (a vision, a plan) and I worked from it, and referred to it, over my first 15 years of ministry that followed.

During that time we saw Mullaghmeen built up from scratch, and in 1993 the Cavan Church planted, and from there various Bible Study groups started in some of those other towns along the way from Enniskillen to Athlone. I got as far as doing outreach in Granard and Edgeworthstown in Co Longford, (heading south) and I got as far West as a Bible Study in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co Leitrim, and doing door-to-door outreach in Boyle, Co Roscommon. Tim Coyle then came along to develop the work in Longford and Roscommon since, and it's amazing to think that Andrew Black is now getting ready to be sent out from this church to do church-planting work in the next county to that - Co Mayo. The dream is still being realised, the vision is still being fulfilled.

'Where there is no vision, the people perish' – so Proverbs 29:18 says. So in the true sense of that word, we still need to dream dreams and have a big vision for God's work, and for reaching out to the lost all around us. That's what the 2020 Vision is all about, that I've been sharing with you here!

So what was God saying to Joseph through these dreams in his life? That's what we want to think about this morning.

1. Joseph had Two Dreams (Genesis 37:5-11)

(i) **Joseph's first dream (vs.6-7)**

Joseph and his brothers were all out in the fields binding sheaves of corn. When suddenly Joseph's sheaf rose and stood upright. And then all the brothers' sheaves gathered around his and bowed down to it.

On that occasion the brothers didn't need Joseph to interpret the dream for them. They knew exactly what it meant straight away! (v.8)

'Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?'

They knew that this dream had something to do with the fact that Joseph would one day rule or reign over them. So Joseph would have known that too. None of them would have known how it was all going to work out. But the dream seemed to be saying that one day Joseph's brothers would come and bow down to him.

Joseph was now in Egypt, the brothers were back at home trying to give the impression to their father that Joseph was dead. Some years had gone by, and Joseph's father Jacob had believed all that time that he was dead. Joseph knew he wasn't dead. He might be in a prison in Egypt, but somehow or other his dream could still come true. One day his brothers *would* come and bow down to him - it wasn't a matter of 'if'; it was just a matter of 'when'.

(ii) **Joseph's second dream (vs.9-11)**

Joseph could see the sun, the moon and eleven stars all bowing down to him! This dream seemed to imply that the whole family would come and bow down to him. This time, Joseph told his father, as well as his brothers about his dream. And at first Jacob rebuked Joseph for his dream,

'What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?'

Again, Jacob had got the message loud and clear! The interpretation of these dreams was obvious! They didn't need Joseph to spell it out for them.

But it was as a result of those dreams that the brothers' hatred had turned to jealousy (v.11), and they had plotted to get rid of him. But his father had simply *'kept all these matters in mind'*, wondering how they would be fulfilled.

I'm sure Joseph kept his own dreams in mind as well. Even though he was now languishing in a prison house in Egypt, I'm sure he often wondered how exactly they were going to come true. But if these dreams had been given to Joseph by God, as God's revelation to Joseph of what he was going to do with his life, then I'm sure God was using these dreams to encourage Joseph that, one day, things were going to get better for him. One day he would rule and reign – perhaps even in Egypt – the Superpower of the world at that time!

Years might have gone by since, but God was still with Joseph, and God was still working out his purposes in Joseph's life, even though he was now in prison. Joseph couldn't see how it was going to work out, he just had to wait.

And as he waited, he simply got on with his work, in the prison house. He was as faithful a steward there as he had been in Potiphar's house. He was just the same. He didn't become bitter. He continued to serve as if he was serving the Lord, not men (39:23).

Until one day, two very special prisoners landed into the same prison house as Joseph was in. These two prisoners were special because they were two of Pharaoh's most trusted officials. One was the chief cup-bearer; the other was the chief baker. So they controlled all that Pharaoh ate and drank. As such they were very important people indeed. Pharaoh literally trusted them with his life. But for some reason, they had offended Pharaoh, and so they had been thrown into prison for a while, until Pharaoh cooled down.

And there they were wondering what was going to happen to them. But it just so happened that the captain of the guard – probably still Potiphar – assigned them to Joseph, and Joseph attended to all their needs.

Joseph was now literally within touching distance of Pharaoh, even though he was in prison. These men knew Pharaoh, the most important man in the land: could it be that these men were Joseph's ticket to the outside world, and maybe even to a whole new life in Pharaoh's court? Maybe the thought crossed Joseph's mind, but he simply looked after them, as diligently as he did all his other chores in the prison. Until one night...

2. Pharaoh's Officials had Two Dreams (Genesis 40:8-19)

It's significant that all the dreams in the story of Joseph come in pairs. Joseph himself had 2 dreams in ch.37, Pharaoh's officials had 2 dreams in ch.40, and in the next chapter, ch.41, Pharaoh himself will have 2 dreams in one night. The significance of the number two is given to us in ch.41:32...

'The reason the dream was given...in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.'

At what point Joseph learned this significance is hard to tell, but did he apply that same reasoning to his own dreams that he had back in ch.37. That the matter of him ruling or reigning, and his family coming and bowing down to him, had all been firmly decided by God, and that God was going to do it soon.

If he had grasped that significance, what an encouragement that would have been to Joseph! God was going to make his dreams come true – very soon!

Meanwhile, Joseph was just going about his business, like he did every morning, when he noticed that these two high officials were looking very glum.

(vs.6-7) 'When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, 'Why are your faces so sad today?'

That's all he asked them: 'Why are you looking so sad today?'

And in response to Joseph simply taking an interest in them, they proceeded to tell him their dreams that they'd had the night before.

It was these two dreams that had left them fearful and confused, wondering what they meant, and wondering what was going to happen to them...

They said:

'We both had dreams, but there is no-one to interpret them.'

To which Joseph replied:

'Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.'

Straightaway, Joseph is using this situation as an opportunity to point them to his God, the Living and True God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Just as his work had pointed Potiphar to God... (you remember Potiphar had recognised that God was with Joseph, giving him success in everything he did, and how his home had been blessed by God, because Joseph was in it?) ...so now Joseph is able to use this confusion over two dreams as another opportunity to point 2 pagan Egyptians away from their superstitions, to God.

(i) The Chief Cupbearer's dream (vs.9-11)

In this man's dream he could see a vine growing, and on the vine there were 3 branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. So this was a very fruitful vine. (It's interesting, but that's what Jacob would say about Joseph at the end of his life in Genesis 49:22 – *'Joseph is a fruitful vine...whose branches climb over a wall'* – In a very real sense Joseph was bringing fruitfulness and blessing across cultural boundaries into Egypt). But this man could see a fruitful vine in his dream, and he could also see that Pharaoh's cup or goblet was in his hand, (after all he was the chief cup-bearer for Pharaoh) so he took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup and gave the cup to Pharaoh to drink. What would Joseph make of all that?

It's Interpretation (vs.12-13)

Joseph proceeds immediately to give the interpretation of the first man's dream: It simply meant that 3 days later, Pharaoh would restore the chief cup-bearer to his rightful position. So this was good news for the cup-bearer, and Joseph was very happy to pass this positive interpretation on to him. But he adds...

A Personal Plea (vs.14-15)

The Cup-bearer may get restored to his position, but what about Joseph? He had been wrongly cast into prison, and so he asks simply, that when this man's dream comes true, and he is back in favour with Pharaoh, could he at least mention Joseph to Pharaoh and see if he couldn't be released from prison? It's then that he reveals to these two men that he had been forcibly carried off from 'the land of the Hebrews' as he calls it – referring back to how his brothers had sold him as a slave down to Egypt. And he goes on to say that even in Egypt he had done nothing wrong, nothing to deserve being put

into a dungeon for! The word he uses for 'dungeon' is the same as 'pit' – the pit that his brothers had thrown him into. So these two incidents were very closely connected in Joseph's mind: He had been thrown into a pit, and he had been thrown into prison – both times without any justification! He had been wronged! He is simply asking that this man would remember him. Surely that wasn't too much to ask...

(ii) The Chief Baker's dream (vs.16-17)

When the Chief Baker heard such a favourable interpretation of the chief Cup-bearer's dream, he was keen to tell his story too, to see if he too would be restored to his rightful position in Pharaoh's court.

So he tells Joseph his dream:

He had been carrying 3 baskets of bread on his head in his dream.

In the top basket, there were all kinds of baked breads for Pharaoh.

But the problem was that the birds of the air were pecking at them and eating them out of the basket. Destroying what he had prepared for Pharaoh.

What did this mean? Well we can almost guess...

It's Interpretation (vs.18-19)

The 3 baskets also referred to 3 days' time for this man. But it was bad news for him. In 3 days' time, Pharaoh wouldn't just lift this man out of prison, he would actually lift off his head, and hang him on a tree. And the birds of the air would come and eat his flesh. He would be beheaded, and he would be left to hang on a tree, where his body would be picked over by the birds!

What an awful way to go! And what bad news for Joseph to have to break to him! But Joseph is faithful to the revelation that God had given in the dream about this man. He doesn't play it down, or seek to soften the blow.

It's a bit like what I've been saying over the last couple of Sunday nights from Romans ch.1. The Gospel is both Good News and Bad News. And we as Gospel preachers have to be faithful in telling both sides of the story. We must be faithful in telling people the bad news: that God is angry with them because of their sin, before they can ever really appreciate the good news, that Jesus has endured God's anger on their behalf, in their place, when he died for our sins on the cross. Joseph was faithful in passing on God's Word in his day, so we have to be faithful in telling the Gospel, good and bad news, in our day too.

And so the dreams came true... (vs.20-22)

The third day actually turned out to be Pharaoh's birthday!

Joseph probably didn't know that when he was interpreting the dreams.

But it was a common occurrence, on Pharaoh's birthday, during a lavish feast, for some prisoners to be set free, or given an amnesty.

And sure enough, Joseph was right, the Chief Cup-bearer was set free and restored to his position beside Pharaoh, but the Chief Baker was taken out of prison, and hanged, just exactly as Joseph had predicted.

God had given Joseph the true interpretation of both of these men's dreams! The question is, would the Chief Cup-bearer, now he was back in his position, and back in favour with Pharaoh, remember to ask Pharaoh about Joseph? Sadly we read in the last verse of this chapter that...

The Chief Cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot about him! (v.23)

There was nothing wrong with Joseph asking to be released from prison, because he was there because of something he had never done. All he was asking for was justice. All he was asking for was a fair hearing. He thought he had got his opportunity to get in touch with Pharaoh, but sadly it wasn't to be. Or at least the time was just not quite right...

But in next week's chapter, ch.41, we will come across another 2 dreams. This time...

3. Pharaoh himself will have Two Dreams (Genesis 41:1-32)

...and that will be the occasion for the Chief Cup-bearer to remember Joseph, tell Pharaoh all about him, and find his way out of prison, to a place of power.

God had not forgotten about Joseph, even though Pharaoh's official had. Joseph was going through a period of great testing, a real test of his patience. But even as he listened to these men's dreams, and gave their interpretations, he must have been reminded of his own dreams so many years earlier. And when these two dreams came true, it must have been a great encouragement to Joseph to believe, that one day soon, his own dreams would yet come true. If God had truly given him those dreams in the first place, then they had to come true, just as these 2 dreams had. These matters had been firmly decided by God, and God would do it soon! What is it that you are dreaming about? What is it that you would love God to do? Is God simply testing your patience, teaching you humility, just as he taught Joseph? Or could it be that God will answer your prayers soon, and bring those dreams to pass? Don't give up hope...

I want to finish this morning with some verses from Habbakuk. Habbakuk was losing patience with God. God told him to *'look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.'* (1:5). In the next chapter he was told to wait for it. It wasn't going to happen overnight, but it would happen (2:3)...

*'For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come and will not delay.'*

Maybe God has revealed something of His Will, and plan and purpose for your life to you? But you need to wait on God. Be patient. God will bring it to pass!