

Daily Devotions from the URC

Joseph part 1

15th – 28th April 2018

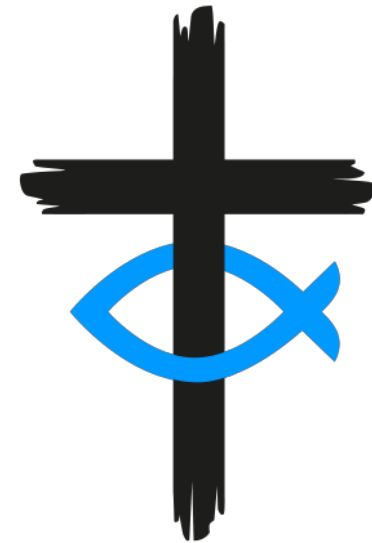


Table of Contents

Introduction		3
Sunday 15th April		4
Monday 16th April	Joseph 1: Setting the Scene	5
Tuesday 17th April	Joseph 2: Dreaming Dreams	7
Wednesday 18th April	Joseph 3: Sold into Slavery	9
Thursday 19th April	Joseph 4: Deception and Grief	11
Friday 20th April	Joseph 5: Doing Well in Egypt	12
Saturday 21st April	Joseph 6: False Rape Claim	15
Sunday 22nd April		17
Monday 23rd April	Joseph 7: Unjust punishment	20
Tuesday 24th April	Joseph 8: Interpreting dreams	21
Wednesday 25th April	Joseph 9: Ingratitude	24
Thursday 26th April	Joseph 10: Memories of things past.	25
Friday 27th April	Joseph 11: Interpretation of dreams	27
Saturday 28th April	Joseph 12: Joseph's rise	30

morning he was a prisoner, held in the dungeons and by the time he went to bed that night he was second only to Pharaoh in the whole land. It appears that Pharaoh did not see the decision to elevate Joseph to his new status as one which required much thought, a simple question of his servants and the decision was made – a recognition of the place of God in the life of this former prisoner. Joseph, of course, was now in the place where his boyhood dreams had predicted and in this final scene Pharaoh gives recognition to this place through the royal proclamation, the insignia of office, the public acclamation and the provision of a wife.

Thirteen years lie between Joseph's first dream and his entering the service of Pharaoh, King of Egypt. They were not easy years and Joseph could have been forgiven for feeling that maybe he had misunderstood God's intention. But we know that Joseph continued through those years to have faith in God and in his guidance as he interpreted the dreams of others – an example of patience for each of us and a reminder that God is in charge.

Prayer

Timeless God,
forgive our impatience,
help us to learn from Joseph
the faith to wait for your time
the wisdom to respond to your signs
and the readiness to follow your call
Amen

and varied ways You speak to us.
When we walk in Your creation,
open our eyes to see You.
When we meet with others,
help us to hear You in their words.
When we read Your word,
reveal Yourself at the prompting of Your Holy Spirit.
When we lie down and sleep,
may our dreams inspire us by Your majesty unbounded. Amen.

Saturday 28th April Joseph 12: Joseph's rise
*Val Morrison Elder in Hall Gate URC Doncaster and former Moderator
of the General Assembly*

Genesis 41: 37-45

The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.

Reflection

They say that a week is a long time in politics and we see the evidence of this in our own political scene. But we observe nothing by comparison with Joseph's rise to power. There is no indication of the timescale in the narrative but we can reasonably infer that when Joseph got up that

Introduction

The epic story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis is both ancient and incredibly contemporary involving, as it does, themes of jealousy, rage, death, sexual desire and forced migration. Over the next four weeks (two weeks in this booklet and two weeks in the next) we will read the story together and reflect on what it offers us now. I hope it encourages you in your journey of discipleship.

*Andy Braunston
Co-ordinator,
Daily Devotions from the URC*

Copyright Information

The Psalms (on Sundays) are taken from the Free Church of Scotland's Psalter Sing Psalms. © Psalmody and Praise Committee, Free Church of Scotland, 15 North Bank Street, Edinburgh, EH1 2LS.

Other Scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition). © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Sunday 15th April

John Grundy is an ordinand at the Northern College

Psalm 43

1 Come! Vindicate me, O my God!
Against this nation plead my cause!
Deliver me from wicked foes
And hypocrites who break your laws.

2 You are my stronghold and my God;
Why then have you rejected me?
Why must I go about in grief,
Downtrodden by the enemy?

3 O send your light forth and your truth!
Let them direct me in your grace
And bring me to your holy hill,
Into your sacred dwelling-place.

4 Then to God's altar I will go,
To God, my joy and my delight,
And I will praise you with the harp.
O God, you are my God of might.

5 Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why are you so disturbed in me?
Trust God, for I will praise him yet;
My Saviour and my God is he.

Reflection

The writer, possibly a Temple Priest in exile, is expressing the feeling of being torn away from their previous close and intimate relationship with God.

Reflection

We humans spend a third of our life asleep; and while we sleep, we dream; but we usually forget last night's dreams as the day progresses. The psychologist Sigmund Freud described dreams as a way to look into our soul to unlock our unconscious mind. Sometimes, our dreams stay with us and will occupy our thoughts, even trouble us, as happened to Pharaoh.

The Joseph in Genesis in his younger life had dreams that stayed with him (the sheaves; the sun-moon-stars), and in today's passage, these dreams are realised when he is appointed second only to Pharaoh. Joseph had to wait half a lifetime for his dreams to come true! One lesson from reading the accounts of the Old Testament patriarchs is patience, where God's long-term plan for their lives was measured in decades.

I am always struck by Pharaoh's reception of Joseph. Pharaoh was a man who had spent his life being told that he was a 'god', the earthly embodiment of Ra. Then in comes Joseph, a Hebrew slave who speaks of 'Elohim' (God). While the text is silent on how this was received by the royal court, Pharaoh accepts Joseph's interpretation. Consider how much Pharaoh was changed in his encounter with God!

Dreams were important for Joseph and Pharaoh, and for others in Bible – Jacob, Samuel, Daniel, Mary's Joseph, Cornelius, Peter etc. - where their dreams (and visions) gave them the push they needed to go God's way. Pharaoh risked all when he trusted in God.

At Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel: "Your young men will see visions; your old men will dream dreams." (Acts 2:17) One way I understand this is a challenge for us not to limit God by our rational (waking) minds, but to be ready to say yes to God's radical call, just as our dreams are unconstrained.

Prayer

Loving God,
We give You thanks for the many

ears. But when I told it to the magicians, there was no one who could explain it to me.'

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.'

The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?' So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.' And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, 'Bow the knee!' Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.'

So often, as the swirl of busyness and the turmoil of daily living surrounds and oppresses us, we can feel like a barrier has come between us and God. We can mourn that closeness and sometimes we just long, desperately long, for the smallest glimmer of light in the gloom that surrounds us.

Knowing that we feel like this sometimes, other people might also be struggling in their relationships with God? Maybe in how we live out and express our faith, God might be using us to be the light that others need?

The Psalmist concludes this lament with the realisation that despite the darkness they were experiencing, their hope in God is still burning. A hope which can't be snuffed-out despite the sorrow, separation and suppression. It is my prayer that no matter what storms we face, the lights of God's hope which burn within every one of us will never be extinguished.

Prayer

When we feel isolated from you,
remind us of your embracing love,
When we can't move out of our places of pain,
encourage us to begin to walk with you,
When we feel oppressed and overwhelmed,
sit with us in our turmoil.
Help us to see your hope that continues to burn within us, even when
we don't realise.
God of hope, as we praise you,
help us to see when we can offer your light into the darkness.
We praise you. Our help and our God. Amen

Monday 16th April Joseph 1: Setting the Scene
Alan Yates, Moderator of General Assembly, 2016-18

Genesis 37: 1-4

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob's family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Reflection

Today we start the Joseph narrative, given in the last 14 chapters of Genesis. Unlike the stories of Abraham and Jacob, this narrative is not made up of a collection of independent and disjointed memories but is a 'sustained and artistically crafted statement of considerable literary finesse' (to quote Walter Brueggemann).

The person of Joseph and the narrative about Joseph is the means by which an important theological statement is offered to Israel, as well as being a linkage between the nomadic period in Canaan and the Exodus account of oppression and liberation. Through hints and implications, the narrative tells us of the providential ways of God: God's way will triumph with or without the contributions of any human actor, including Joseph. It is a highly moral tale of the innocent victim of jealousy and ill-will, who turns the tables on his persecutors and returns good for evil. Because of this, some have said that Joseph is suggestive of Jesus, a typological precursor.

In the first few verses we see the innocence of Joseph somewhat clouded by him behaving as if he were a cut above his brothers; like the spoilt darling of Jacob, and is further exacerbated by him telling tales on them. Despite this unpromising beginning to the narrative, Joseph is portrayed as a man of integrity who is happy to serve all. The more we read of Joseph the more we see Jesus reflected in him.

Prayer

Father God, at times you remain hidden to us.
But, like Joseph, we can see you at work when we look back.

he was growing up. Like many things knowledge and experience that is freely available but temperament and openness to an experience or the insights another passes on birthing in turn a new expert.

Prayer

Loving and steadfast God,
we find you in all places and all times.
Help us to be open to the thoughts, ideas, and experiences
that we will meet today,
those in our comfort zone
and those which stretch us beyond the point
that we ever thought possible.
Help us to feel your hand in ours
as we walk forward on our journey of faith.
Amen

Friday 27th April Joseph 11: Interpretation of dreams
Walt Johnson, Elder at Wilbraham St Ninian's URC

Genesis 41: 14-36

Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.' Joseph answered Pharaoh, 'It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer.' Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile; and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt. The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as before. Then I awoke. I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk, and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them; and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good

wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, 'I remember my faults today. Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each according to his dream. As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.'

Reflection

I have spent very little time in my life thinking about dreams. I know, within myself, that I do have dreams and just, very occasionally, I remember them. However, the matter of dreams and their interpretation has been recorded through millennia – records exist from at least 2000 years before Jesus' feet first touched the Egyptian earth. Dream work can be traced through history and faith groups from that time on. Joseph's time frame was somewhere between 1000 and 1500 years before the birth of Jesus.

Those who interpreted dreams (the magicians and wise men above) were highly respected and probably should be thought of as the forerunners to medics; to consult such a magician as commonplace perhaps as, if not a 21st century trip to the doctor, a pre-NHS consultation. In other words, not so common amongst the poor.

I have a cousin in Canada and her wife goes religiously to her weekly dream group where members share their dreams and in a safe environment explore what they might mean. Nowadays this area of analysis is understood to belong to the psychotherapist.

And so I pondered where did Joseph's expertise and apparent comfort around dream work come from? He did not have the luxury of being able to look up on the internet the accepted meaning attributed to dreams about cattle, cows or corn and clearly there is no suggestion in his story that he travelled to study before being trafficked to Egypt. I like to think that perhaps this was just knowledge that he picked up as

I pray that you will give us the confidence in all aspects of our lives, at all times, to live in the deep knowledge that you can and will use even us to fulfil your will. Amen

Tuesday 17th April Joseph 2: Dreaming Dreams
The Rev'd Kevin Watson, Yorkshire Synod Moderator and Moderator of General Assembly 2016-18

Genesis 37: 5-11

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, 'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?' So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Reflection

Some of us cannot hear this story without Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat humming away in the background, and maybe the words, "any dream will do" penned by Tim Rice. But that just doesn't make sense – any dream won't do! Of the dreams I do remember, most are rubbish, and far too many are more nightmare than dream! So, it must be wonderful to have a God-given dream, that is actually a prophetic word – just like Joseph had. Here is a dream that "will do" for surely everyone will rejoice at Joseph being chosen as God's messenger. Not exactly! The meaning was so clear, it hardly needed interpretation, for the family would be humiliated to have to bow down before their

younger brother. They wouldn't hear this as a Word from God, and as for coming true – they would make sure it didn't!

Spiritual gifts, like dreams from God are awesome, giving life, healing, hope and restoration, re-assuring people of God's love. It is because they are so transformative, so powerful, that they can also be so dangerous, and destructive. Like a box of matches that gives light and warmth, in the wrong hands can burn down a whole forest. That is why Scripture is so clear that all spiritual gifts are precious and need careful handling, to be tested, and shared in the Spirit of Christ, with humility and service. The story shows what happens when handled badly, and with the wrong attitude.

Already Joseph was on a pedestal, spoiled by his father. If only he had someone he could trust - sadly maybe his mother Rachel, who had died. Do you have someone to confide in, share your vulnerability, even to test out what God may be saying in your life? Seek God's spiritual gifts, but may your motivation be Christ's love, and may you be surrounded by Christ's fellow travellers. Then, close your eyes and draw back the curtain...

Prayer

Give me the confidence
to be open to receive spiritual gifts
to heal, help, reconcile and restore.
Give me the courage to use your gifts
and the wisdom to use them well.
Give me discipline to accept the testing of these gifts
by Christians we trust in counsel and councils.
Give me a servant-heart
to let these gifts be shared freely and generously.
Give me humility to welcome and receive the gifts of others.
Give me the dreams that are full of your life-giving Spirit.

Prayer

Eternal Father,
who remembers all,
we give thanks that no-one is ever forgotten by you.
Within the heart of God every sparrow that falls
is held in Love's embrace,
every hair on every head is known in Knowledge's library.

Divine presence, help us to always be grateful,
even when that requires great strength, peace or hope.
For the beauty, complexity, and harshness of life
we will give thanks.
We give thanks that we can be awestruck
by Creation around us,
dumbfounded by its intricacy,
and overwhelmed by its ambiguousness.

We give thanks for the blessing of life,
both what we see as good and bad,
and everything in-between. Amen

Thursday 26th April Joseph 10: Memories of things past
*The Rev'd Helen M Mee is minister in Granton United Church, Edinburgh
and Carluke URC, and works with the Synod of Scotland's South Link
and is the Convenor of the URC Equalities Committee*

Genesis 41: 1-13

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. And Pharaoh awoke. Then he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke, and it was a dream. In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its

Wednesday 25th April Joseph 9: Ingratitude

The Rev'd David Coaker is minister of Grays URC in Essex

Genesis 40: 20-23

On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; but the chief baker he hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Reflection

We don't know what crimes, perceived or actual, had led to the cupbearer and baker being imprisoned. It may have just been at the whim of the all-powerful Pharaoh. One night in prison they both have dreams, and when Joseph visits them in the morning he can see that they are troubled. They tell Joseph their dreams, he interprets them, and in three days they have proved true. Both are 'lifted up', but one is restored to their position and the other is hanged.

Joseph specifically asked for the chief cupbearer to remember him, and make his case to Pharaoh, if the dream proved true, but the restored official forgets and Joseph is left to languish in prison for two more years.

Such ingratitude from the cupbearer! He is restored to all of his previous duties and privileges, but doesn't speak a word for the man who relieved his troubles whilst in prison. Perhaps he was too excited, or all too aware that the whims of Pharaoh could have had him hanging by the neck rather than the baker.

The circle of favours and obligations, of scratching backs, is how things get done. I help you, so in turn you help me. Sometimes it can be incredibly transactional, but often it is just how we naturally engage with each other. Showing gratitude is a way in which we build relationships, we build trust, and create community.

Wednesday 18th April Joseph 3: Sold into Slavery

The Revd John Durell, retired minister and member of Waddington Street URC, Durham

Genesis 37: 12-28

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' 'I am seeking my brothers,' he said; 'tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.' The man said, 'They have gone away, for I heard them say, "Let us go to Dothan."' So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him'—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Reflection

Joseph is trafficked. Like countless individuals through history, and more than ever in our own time, he is going to find himself stripped of clothing, possessions and identity. And it's all such a contrast with his dreams of a future that was going to be so much brighter and more assured than any of his brothers back home. Where did it all go wrong?

The young girl today who ends up in the massage parlour or the nail bar may discover too late that her family were naive, and too trusting of the smooth talking agents who promised her that wonderful job in the West. But Joseph has to live with the pain that those closest to him have betrayed him deliberately; and if he has overheard their conspiratorial conversations, he realises how half-hearted even Reuben and Judah have been in trying to defend him. To them too, he is just "this dreamer".

But we probably miss the force of that word. Joseph is not what we would call a daydreamer. His dreams are not at all like the childish ambitions for fame and celebrity, or even those more specific longings for a new life in a better place, that lie behind many journeys today. Rather, Joseph's dreams relate to the hidden purposes of the God who is hardly mentioned in these chapters, but who is the inspiration of the prophets who speak out in his name, and who prove themselves ready even to risk their lives as they cry out for justice, and an end to slavery and oppression in every age.

Dare we dream of, and then work for, a time when people are trafficked no more? "I have a dream" could still be a powerful cry.

Prayer

Journeying God

Be close to all who journey
along ways that they have not chosen.
Protect all who are victims
of trafficking, exploitation, and greed.

Two senior officers from Pharaoh's court, the cupbearer and the baker, had upset their king and they have been imprisoned in the house of Potiphar, the captain of the guard. We are not told what they had done to make Pharaoh angry or whether their imprisonment was justified. The result of something trivial maybe something far more serious. The Talmud suggests that at a party given by Pharaoh 'the princes discovered stone grits in their bread, and one of them discovered a fly in his wine'. Maybe like many through the centuries up to our own day they were just victims of the unjust sensitivities of power.

Joseph undergoes a temporary change in fortune as he is transferred from his own prison cell to wait upon these two men.

One night the two men both have a dream. It is well known that in ancient Egypt dreams were important and the two officers want an expert who will decipher the meaning of their dreams. Joseph sees their distress and asks the two men to tell him their dreams. He makes the point that is at the heart of today's reading: "Do not interpretations belong to God". Joseph is no professional interpreter of dreams, their meaning is given to him by God. Both Joseph and later Daniel rise to positions of authority in foreign courts through their interpretation of dreams and both make the same point that it is God who interprets dreams (see also Daniel 2:27-28).

Joseph goes on to explain the dreams. He pleads to the cupbearer to remember him when it is well with him. Joseph expresses frustration at his circumstances: "I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon". Another victim of injustice, perhaps?

Prayer

Loving God,
things don't always happen in ways we want,
neither do things always meet our expectation.
Help us to be patient and put our trust in you.
Amen.

Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he waited on them; and they continued for some time in custody. One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh’s officers, who were with him in custody in his master’s house, ‘Why are your faces downcast today?’ They said to him, ‘We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.’ And Joseph said to them, ‘Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.’

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, ‘In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand.’ Then Joseph said to him, ‘This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh’s cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.’

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favourable, he said to Joseph, ‘I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head.’ And Joseph answered, ‘This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a pole; and the birds will eat the flesh from you.’

Reflection

The story of Joseph begins with two dreams that offend his family. Today we get two more dreams, this time they are not dreamt by Joseph but by other characters in the story.

Strengthen all who call for and work for their freedom
that we may all journey with you
in your ways of justice and mercy and peace.

Thursday 19th April Joseph 4: Deception and Grief
The Rev’d Lena Talbot Minister in North East Blackburn

Genesis 37: 29-36

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?” Then they took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, “This we have found; see now whether it is your son’s robe or not.” He recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.
Reflection

I love Genesis it’s all in there! The whole of human life! We think we invented anaesthetic, operations and cloning but the ideas are there in Genesis at the beginning of all time. Along with: murder, drunkenness, incest, lust, lies and surrogacy, all of human life unfolding. There isn’t anything we read in our papers or see on TV that isn’t in Genesis and while this sounds cynical it isn’t meant to be. It’s not about picking over the bones of the ancestors it simply makes the point that when God made us and gave us free will, we see in Genesis just what humans are capable of.

Human stories; picture Rebekah sliding off her camel to meet Isaac in the fields and the love at first sight this text implies. More family squabbles between her sons Esau and Jacob and what about Jacob? At least thirteen children with four different ladies, bet there were fun times in their tents! And it’s through Jacob and his favourite wife Rachel we

have Joseph and the passage above and what does that tell us about human nature?

Sibling rivalry! Poor old Reuben, the others wanted to kill Joseph, Reuben wanted to save him. Reuben probably had no part in the original plan to kill Joseph because he went back to the brothers to tell them Joseph had gone. The next thing that happens is that they (and I wonder if Reuben is now part of the 'they' – until now this is very much about Reuben and them) kill a goat and dip Joseph's robe in the blood and have it sent to Jacob. Then Jacob mourns for several days and all his sons (and all his daughters try to comfort him.) What hypocrisy!

Prayer

Lord God,
so much the scriptures tell us and show us,
not least what we are capable of.
So many questions they raise – why we do the things we do?
And as we question and wonder,
Lord, we come to you in prayer,
realising that to try and understand
all the things that Scripture unfolds is impossible.
But we recognize that we are indeed wonderfully made
with all our emotions
and we give you thanks for creating each one of us
unique and special and for loving us
not just in spite of what we are
but because of who we are.
Thank you Lord, Amen.

Friday 20th April Joseph 5: Doing Well in Egypt
*John Ellis, Immediate Past Moderator of the General Assembly and
Church Secretary of Capel United Church in Kent*

Genesis 39: 1-6

Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The Lord was with Joseph,

Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

Reflection

Bad things happen to good people, bad people, and all the people in between. Just because we're Christians doesn't mean to say we won't go through horrendous times when it seems everything and everyone is against us. Here, Joseph is blamed for something he didn't do at all. As a result, he is imprisoned and it must seem as if everything is all over for him and that even God has deserted him. Injustices can be very difficult to bear!

However, God is with Joseph always, and brings good things out of his bad circumstances. Joseph has the chance to improve his skills in both project and people management in a way he never expected – and this experience will prove very useful to him in the times ahead. God always has a plan and uses everything to bring that plan to fruition for Joseph and for all of us, no matter what is happening in our lives.

Prayer

Dear God,
thank You that You are always with us,
no matter how awful our circumstances might be.
Help us to trust that You will bring good out of evil,
and use us for Your glory. Amen.

Tuesday 24th April Joseph 8: Interpreting dreams
The Rev'd Dr David Whiting Sunderland and Boldon URC Partnership

Genesis 40: 1-19

Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cup bearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where

So the flow of the Psalm might be something like this: We worship you God because you have already done this, this and this but we now find ourselves in this dire situation and its not as a result of our lack of faith or our sin, please help us!

I wonder how many times we cut straight to "please help us!"

Do we actively watch out for signs of God's activity in our world - at any level? And if so, do we share it with others, blog it, tweet it, sing it, pray it?

Do we take time to tell God how we feel about the current situation, good or bad, we find ourselves, or someone else, in?

Do we review our lives and our behaviour and, if so, do we invite God to review it with us and seek his forgiveness or guidance as necessary?

Prayer

O God,
Our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home.
(Isaac Watts)

Monday 23rd April Joseph 7: Unjust punishment
Anne Brooke attends Elstead URC in Surrey

Genesis 39: 19-23

When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison.

But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favour in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to

and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favour in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Reflection

The closest I have come to staying in the house of the Captain of the Royal Guard was staying at the bottom end of Windsor Castle, across the courtyard from the homes of the Military Knights of Windsor and with Guardsmen on sentry duty marching to and fro. I was there with Philip, the youngest Admiral in the Royal Navy. Educated at Mansfield College, his background was more orthodox than Joseph's. We were both part of a group who were deemed "successful" and invited to consider the challenges of assuming national leadership.

From a pacifist family, I start with no particular enthusiasm for Admirals. Philip was nonetheless striking not for his knowledge of naval weaponry, although he was an expert, but for the way the human dimension of every situation was what caught his attention first. He lived out his words by finding ways of relating warmly to every one of our diverse group. If we have to have a Navy, let people like him lead it. I was not surprised to read recently that he is now Sir Philip KCB and First Sea Lord.

I wonder what it was about the youthful Joseph that so impressed Potiphar. Clearly he could do his job, but maybe he did it with unusual humanity. The way he later treated his family in Egypt suggests he had learnt something from his earlier selfish arrogance. In every context, we need leaders who do more than just the job.

And Joseph was actually No.2. It was still Potiphar's household. A former President of the Methodist Conference, Leslie Griffiths, likes to say "It is always the No.2s who do the work." Not quite true, but often those just

behind the prominent leader carry as large a workload for less visible reward. Those with fast-moving careers often see their debt to the calm, competent No.2s who have supported them at each stage.

Prayer

Lord God

I pray for those who are called to lead
and for those who stand just behind them.

I pray especially for such people that I will meet today at work or this weekend at church.

When I am leading, help me to notice those on whom I rely. When I am in support, make me generous and gracious even when my efforts are taken for granted.

Whatever my role, give me the insight and energy to include the human dimension.

Let me see each individual as made in your image. Amen

false gods had stretched our hands,
21 Would God not know, for he our hearts
and secrets understands?

22 And yet it is for your own sake
we face death all the day;
We're reckoned like the sheep that are
for slaughter led away.

23 Awake, O Lord! Arise from sleep!
Do not reject your folk.

24 Why hide your face and quite forget
our pain and cruel yoke?

25 For we've been humbled to the dust,
laid prostrate on the ground.

26 Rise, help, redeem, because within
your cov'nant love we're found.

Reflection

This Psalm is written in response to some event which has gone badly wrong and, in verses 9-16, the writer pours out his heart about the defeat, and the ensuing abuse, plundering, mocking, shame poured on their heads by the victors. But the psalm begins with a remembering of the stories of the nation's history and God's part in those events and it puts me in mind of a poem by Steve Turner which goes:

"History repeats itself. Has to. No-one listens."

It was important for the nation to tell and re-tell those stories in the meeting places, at the family meal-table, to keep them in the nation's consciousness, to later write them down for all to read, so that they would know that regardless of the current situation, whether one of victory or defeat, that they are God's people and God's hand is always ready to respond to our faith in him.

rejoicing all day long,
And to your name for evermore
we'll offer praise in song.

9 But now you have rejected us
and brought us very low,
And when our armies march to war,
with them you do not go.

10 Our hateful foe has plundered us;
you made us flee, O God.

11 You let us be devoured like sheep
and scattered us abroad.

12 You cheaply sold your people off;
the sale produced no gain.

13 Our neighbours look on us with scorn
and treat us with disdain.

14 You make us a reproach and shame
before the nations' face;
The peoples shake their heads at us
and mock at our disgrace.

15 Disgrace I suffer all day long
and I am filled with shame

16 Because of mocking taunts and scorn
from those who hate my name.

17 All this has happened to us, though
we'd not forgotten you.
We had not spurned your covenant;
to it we had been true.

18 Our hearts did not turn back; our feet
from your path did not stray.

19 You crushed and left us in the dark
where jackals hunt their prey.

20 If we forgot God's name, or to

Saturday 21st April Joseph 6: False Rape Claim
Ed Strachan, Elder/Lay Preacher, Heald Green United Reformed Church

Genesis 39: 6–18

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with me'. But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God? And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, she caught hold of his garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, she called out to the members of her household and said to them, 'See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.' Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, 'The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled outside'

Reflection

Oh, what a tangled web we weave... Actually, this web wasn't as tangled as it could have been. Potiphar's wife fancied Joseph. Potiphar, himself, seems to have been so occupied with affairs of state that he neglected those closest to him, or those who should have been closest to him. Still happens.

"Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd, Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd", the men among us say smugly. No doubt, female

readers of this reflection will have their own (sardonic?) ideas on this particular couplet, and no doubt also their own formative experiences.

Power and sex are powerful forces, as we have seen in recent years, and powerful means of exploitation. In this instance, both were in the hands of one person, who was unscrupulous about their use in achieving her ends. Joseph's was the stance of integrity, but an integrity that did not carry the presumption of innocence. He was clay in her hands.

Things did not go as badly for Joseph as they might have done. He came through and prospered, ending up in a very high position indeed, under Pharaoh.

But do we sometimes pay too high a price for our worldly success? Are those closest to us paying too high an emotional price? What effect do our ambitions, wishes, aspirations have on them and their lives?

And does our own personal integrity bear as close a scrutiny as Joseph's does, at least in this instance?

Personal integrity and a properly grounded and inspired (yes, those attributes can exist simultaneously) sense of priorities have to play their part in our faith journeys. And at the time of writing of this reflection, maybe it's not too late to include them specifically as latecomers to my own resolutions for 2018!

Prayer

O loving yet all-seeing Father,
Grant us the power and privilege
To see ourselves as others do,
To hear ourselves as others do,
And to imagine ourselves into the perspectives of others on us.

And grant us the resolution
To make such necessary changes in ourselves
As will commend ourselves to others,
As people who may be trusted without reserve,
Not to exploit or betray,
or use those we meet for our own ends,

But rather to live for those others, close to us and further away,
And make a good witness to the Gospel of your Son.

Sunday 22nd April

The Rev'd Sheila Coop is Minister of Macedonia URC in Failsworth

Psalm 44

1 O God, we with our ears have heard—
our fathers told us so—
What you accomplished in their days,
in days of long ago.

2 Your hand drove nations out, and placed
our fathers there instead;
You crushed the peoples, but you caused
our tribes to grow and spread.

3 It was not by their sword or arm
that they possessed the land,
But by your love and favour shown,
and by your mighty hand.

4 You are my King and God; ordain
for Jacob victories.

5 Through you we trample down our foes
and rout our enemies.

6 My sword does not bring victory,
nor do I trust my bow.

7 You put our enemies to shame
and overcome our foe.

8 In God alone we make our boast,