

“MAN AT THE TOP”
The Story of Joseph - 3
Genesis 41:41-57

Well, we've had a look at the way in which Joseph's life has developed – from the spoilt brat who was his dad's favourite and who sneaked on his brothers, through his phase as a dreamer, which led to his becoming a victim and a slave, to the time he spent as servant and manager of Potiphar's household. Last time we looked at his story, we saw how he became a victim once again – on this occasion as a result of his being set up in a sexual harassment case by his master's wife. Thrown into jail, he soon wins the approval of the governor and becomes a trusted assistant who helps to run the prison. His fortunes have gone up and down and we have seen how his “success”, if you want to call it that, has varied in each of the different situations.

This week we see him approaching the zenith of his career as he becomes the “Man at the Top” – or, at least, as close as he could get to the top without actually being Pharaoh. We're going to look at Joseph as leader, which is appropriate here in this congregation as the time to elect some of our elders comes round once again. What can we learn about leadership from the story of Joseph? *Genesis* (indeed the whole of the Bible) isn't, of course, a management handbook – nor was it ever meant to be – but there are certain principles, I think, which we can draw from this story which may be of help to us several millennia later.

And although we might want to apply these principles to leadership in the church, we must not forget that the story we have of Joseph as leader is set not in a church, not in the context of leading God's people, but in a very “secular” context. Joseph is here being asked to operate as a leader in a situation where all those with whom he works subscribe to a quite different belief system. And he is not called upon to run a church or a place of worship, but to organise and manage a project which involved the population of a nation in which there is no conception of One True God. In short, Joseph is in the kind of situation many of you are in each and every day – giving a lead to people who have little or no sympathy with your faith and philosophy, for the greater good (we assume) of a wider group of people who want to use your company's shops or restaurants, borrow money or books from your banks or libraries, study at your school or college, travel on your trains or buses, and so on. Can the Bible have anything to say about that? Well, let's have a look at Joseph's story – and remember that the person who is speaking has studied theology, not business administration!

Although we began to read part of the way through chapter 41 this morning, this section of Joseph's story begins back at the end of chapter 39. As we've already said, Joseph is in prison, having been fitted up like a kipper. God is clearly with Joseph (39:23) and he is given a good deal of responsibility in the prison. He's a “trustee”, and he takes his duties seriously. When Pharaoh condemns two of his most senior servants to the same prison, Joseph is given them to look after. The baker and the wine-taster are “attended” by Joseph (40:4). That word there in Hebrew actually means that he *served* them. He's not fully a leader at this stage, but he is nevertheless starting to show signs of the qualities needed if he is to manage others successfully. In church parlance, we call it “servant leadership” – the readiness to get stuck in and do your bit, rather than always wanting to pass the buck to someone else.

And that issues forth in **care and concern** for those around him. Although he remains a prisoner, Joseph still has a certain amount of freedom within the jail and he is clearly in a position of responsibility. He notices their mood when he comes into their cell one morning and enquires what the trouble is (40:6,7). He is concerned for those around him and wants to help if he can. It's a kind of pastoral eye which he keeps on them. Of the various bosses under whom I have worked, the ones who have had the greatest respect amongst the workforce are those who have shown some interest in those who work with and for them. Again, it's that servant leadership that is being modelled.

The problem, as you may well know, is that these two men have had disturbing dreams (40:9-11,16,17) and they are rather anxious about what they might mean. They tell Joseph and he is able to interpret them. But in doing so, we see that he is **prepared to give them both good news and bad**. He's not one of these leaders who tries to hide things from those who need to know. It's most unsettling when something happens at your place of work or wherever, and it comes as a great shock because those who should have said something have kept quiet. The wine-taster has good news – in three days time he'll be holding his head high because Pharaoh is going to reinstate him. The baker, on the other hand, will have his head held high too – on a pole. (It's the same word in Hebrew for both “*lift up*” and “*lift off*” here.) Joseph is a leader who is prepared to bite the bullet – it saves a lot of hassle and bad feeling in the end (as Emma and Curly have found out in the situation with Norris as god-parent!).

Because of the success of Joseph's interpretation of the dreams, he eventually gets asked to help Pharaoh out with a couple of dreams he has had. And as a result of that he is promoted to being the ruler's right hand man, which is where we really do see his qualities of leadership come into play. What is very interesting in all of this is his **willingness to recognise God's activity** in it all – and to let other people know about it. He tells the two prisoners that in 40:8b, reflecting the Hebrew view that only God can know the future. One commentator (Fritsch: *Layman's Commentary*) says this: “*Interpretation of dreams is not a science which can be learned [as Freud would have us believe], nor an occult art which can be practised by magical means, as the Egyptians believed [and the New Age gurus believe]. According to the Hebrew view, God alone knows the future and the person to whom God reveals his secrets is the only one who can interpret them.*”

In front of Pharaoh, Joseph makes the same point. He responds with surprise when the Egyptian ruler suggests that it's Joseph's own powers that are capable of interpreting dreams. “*I cannot do it*” (41:16) is a one word expostulation in Hebrew. But he then has no hesitation in pointing to the One True God, as he does on other occasions too (41:25,28,32). Here is a man who sees that all that he does is due to God's gracious activity – and he appears to bring it quiet naturally into the conversation. I wonder how many of us are prepared to acknowledge that openly in our daily workplace environment. You've been struggling with a problem and prayed about it. When the answer becomes clear, do you acknowledge that to those around you? When a tricky situation is resolved because God has spoken to you through some words from the Bible, do you allow other people to know that? As I've said on previous occasions, there are many Christians who say that they are in the positions they are today because God wanted one of his people in that job – but they need to act and speak like a Christian in that position or the post might just as well be filled by anyone else. Do you allow the glory to go to God and witness to his activity in your life and in the wider world?

As a leader, Joseph also **took a long-term view** of things. He saw beyond the short-term fix to what God's longer plan was. Just looking around our society today, it seems to me that there is an awful lot that is going wrong, and very often that is due to short-term thinking – politically, financially, educationally. We don't want to wait for things – hence the overwhelming dependence on credit, the lack of investment in many areas, the desperate desire to give the shareholders a big return every year, the trend towards cosmetic target setting. Joseph knew God had a plan for him. So he sat waiting in the prison for two years after the wine-taster had promised to have a word on his behalf to Pharaoh. (You may, of course, protest quiet justifiably that he didn't have a great deal of choice in that matter!) But if you look at what was sung about Joseph in *Psalms 105:19*, you'll see that there was a sense in which Joseph was waiting for what he knew was God's plan.

And when it comes to advising Pharaoh, his plan is one that will take at least seven years before the benefit is experienced – in fact, it's a fourteen year plan altogether. But Joseph knows that it's worth waiting for God. God has his plans for this church and it has been very difficult over the past two or three years being patient with committees, planners, architects and so on. We all wanted things to happen by the end of the week and got discouraged when they didn't. But God knows what's going on: he has his own timescale and asks us to be patient: it will be worth it in the end. In many ways it's far more difficult

outside the church: the pressure for results is much greater, but there are times when we simply have to take the long view – and realise that, unlike Joseph, we might not be around to see the results.

Part of Joseph's ability to take the longer term view is due to his discernment, his talent to **identify the need in the situation**. He's not necessarily a prophetic person: he just uses his intelligence to spot the ways things are going. Another writer (J H Sailhamer: *Expositors' Bible Commentary*) writes as follows: "*Joseph is a leader like Daniel, who needed to 'discern' (cf Daniel 9:2) the visions of the prophets to find the course of God's future dealings with his people, rather than to wait on new prophecies to come. Joseph, like Solomon, is a picture of a truly wise leader who understands and sees the will of God in the affairs of those around him.*" There are those leaders who are truly "visionary", aren't there? They don't come along that often, but they certainly stand out when they do. They think outside the box and have amazingly creative minds. They're the ones who come and talk to the rest of us at business seminars and ministers' conferences. Most leaders, though, have to be content with looking at the situation and simply responding sensibly to what's going on.

Joseph looked at the need and suggested that a boss was needed to sort this situation out (41:33). He even identified the necessary qualities for this person – wisdom and discernment. There was nothing terribly visionary there: it was just an analysis of the situation and the needs of that situation. There were going to be desperate times and there would be a need for someone to oversee the whole situation. And whoever it was would need help – the "*commissioners*" he mentions in 41:34. This was not going to be a job for one person alone: there would need to be some delegation. That was a lesson that Moses had to learn from his father-in-law as the pressure on him grew during the Exodus. Good leaders are those who can tell which way the wind is blowing and see how it can be harnessed for good. And they can also see what's needed in terms of resources and personnel for the job to be done properly.

The final thing that comes out of this passage in terms of Joseph's attitude to leadership is to be found in a rather strange place – the names of his two sons. In a culture where names carried far more significance in terms of their meaning than is the case today, Joseph was very careful in the names he chose. And they say something very powerful to us today in a situation where there is much greater social mobility.

Manasseh was so named because Joseph saw the need to **forget what had gone before** (41:51). The traumas of the past and the difficulties that he had had to undergo were just so much water under the bridge. He wanted to put all that behind him. It would have been so easy for him to have held on to all the bitterness and resentment of the past and to have allowed that to sour his new relationships and networks. But God had given him the grace to be able to put it all out of his mind. He was making a new start. Part of the problem for many of us is that we do not seem to be able to do that. Moving from a situation where there has been unpleasantness or division, we carry the wounds on into the next situation and end up responding to others with fear, mistrust, suspicion. It's then that we need to ask for God to help us break with that and move forward. That's what Joseph did – and it influenced the name of his second son too.

Ephraim was so named because Joseph recognised that, freed from the hurt of the past, **he could be used by God in a new situation** (41:52). The new position was one of opportunity and God had helped him to make the most of it. He had come into it with an awareness that it was God who was at work – and when things worked out well, he didn't forget that it had happened with his help. It's easy for us to go into new situations desperate for God's help and when things start to take off and business is booming the spotlight begins to shift from God to ourselves. Don Carson, the Biblical scholar; Handel, the composer; Les Murray, the Australian poet – all of them have reached the top of their respective trees. All of them write *Soli Deo gloria* on their work: "*Glory to God alone*".

So what does this all boil down to, then? I'm sorry we can't encapsulate it in a checklist of handy hints for leaders. God's word, alas! is never that trite (however much Rob Parsons and others might like it to be). But there are three qualities that stand out in this part of Joseph's life and which stand in quite stark

contrast to what we saw of him in the first episode. They are qualities which should be obvious in the lives of all God's people, not just leaders: and in a society pervaded by the cult of celebrity, the suspicion of authority, and the temptation to go for the quick fix where the end justifies the means there is a desperate need for us to model them.

Joseph was a person of **humility, obedience to God** and **integrity**. He did not push himself forward in any of these situations we have considered today and he showed himself to be willing to serve others, both in prison and in the court of Pharaoh. Even his leadership during the time of food crisis was in order to help the people of Egypt, not to feather his own nest.

At all times he recognised that he was God's agent in this situation and was prepared to follow where God led. He acknowledged his debt to God and his reliance on him in all that he did – and was not afraid to do so openly as he spoke with others who clearly did not share his faith.

And at all times he acted with transparency and honesty. The temptation to profit from the grain stockpiling and to indulge in corruption at its distribution must have been immense, but he resisted. He did the job he was asked to do to the very best of his ability and gave the glory to God. And God blessed him in wonderful ways – but none more so than in the way we shall see next time. Pray to God that he will grant you humility, obedience and integrity: it is greatly needed in our society at this time, especially amongst those in positions of leadership and influence.