

Today we begin a series from the book of Genesis following the story of Joseph and then moving on to Moses and the Exodus.

Our texts were written around the 5th or 6th centuries BC but they are the written version of what had been an oral tradition from around 1500BC. These stories are very ancient and yet they have a relevance to our lives today.

We are, who we have become, because of all we have experienced. Of course, we've taken decisions and made choices but even those decisions and choices can be influenced by our own personal history. Like it or not we are shaped and influenced by our own history.

From time-to-time Terry and Jane and I have referred to the Enneagram and the nine personalities it describes. A central truth of the Enneagram is that we are **not** truly the personality we have adopted and become.

We each have found a way to thrive and survive and be loved and becoming that person worked for us...but it's not truly who we are, that is our false self.

I can illustrate the claim I've just made from the story of Jacob down to his many sons and the favoured child Joseph. Briefly - Jacob's history and then today's story.

Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau was the oldest and by rights should have received Isaac's final blessing and inheritance, but Rebekah favoured one of her twin boys, Jacob over Esau (remember that for later) and she helped him trick Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing.

Jacob must flee for his life. His story is full of intrigue, twists and turns. He's a tricky character but is tricked into

marrying the wrong woman. He marries the wrong sister, so ends up marrying two sisters but he loves Rachel more than Leah.

Leah the unloved can have children, Rachel cannot, so Rachel gives her slave-girl to Jacob and she has children, so the jealous Leah gives her slave girl to Jacob and she has children...the whole story is dripping with jealousy and bitterness and rivalry. Just look at the names Leah gave her children

Reuben – behold a son (the Lord has seen my misery)
Simeon – God has heard (I am not loved)
Levi – joined (surely my husband will love me now)

Finally – Rachel conceives a child and she calls him Joseph but the name means “may Jehovah add” – Rachel is already hoping for another son having just delivered one! She dies giving birth to Benjamin (Ben-oni son of my pain) Benjamin – son of my strength.

This is one mixed up family to say the very least and history repeats itself, one twin Jacob, is favoured over another, Esau. One wife Rachel is favoured over another Leah. The sons bear names that refer to the suffering and joys of the mothers.

The end result is a chaotic family that is toxic and because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah and Rachel has died he favours Rachel's son over all the others.

Joseph is given the fabled coat an ornate robe and his brothers hate him.

Joseph tells tales on them to his father and his brothers hate him.

Joseph has dreams of grandeur and being worshipped and his brothers hate him.

(In the way it's written we can hear the centuries of storytelling, the hated him, they hated him.)

Then comes the drama. Far from the family home, caring for the flocks the brothers spot Joseph and their hatred overflows and they decide to kill him.

It doesn't tell us who has the idea first, but they all seem keen on the plan, only Reuben the oldest realises this is a step too far and plans to rescue Joseph later, but things take a sinister turn, they spot Ishmaelite traders and sell Joseph into slavery.

What we can notice in the readings today is that God seems absent. This is the family of the person God has chosen through whom he will demonstrate his goodness and grace to the world but what a disastrous bunch of people. Where is God in all the suffering and intrigue and hatred and jealousy? How can any good come out of any of this?

But God is never absent from any situation and God can use even the most convoluted and complex situations to bring about his own purpose.

As the story develops, we shall see the change in Joseph from being the spoiled favourite, hated by his brothers, boasting of strange dreams of power, to being a man of God, humble, sincere, unafraid and truly himself.

In today's scriptures we see Joseph as the product of his environment and personal history. He is Enneagram number 4 – the Individualist / Romantic. He's the favoured spoiled son who dreams of being unique. He's more special than all the others.

When mistreated by his brothers it would reinforce his misunderstood narrative – he might see himself as a tragic hero.

At this stage God appears to have no role in Joseph's life he is the centre of his own story of which he is the hero – except he's just been sold as a slave.

I said earlier that we each have found a way to thrive and survive and be loved and becoming *that person* worked for us...but it's not truly who we are, it's the false self. Last week we heard these words in one of Dolapo's scriptures (Romans 12) *Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. This will lead to us being our true selves.*

In other words – don't stay the way the world has made you...allow yourselves to be transformed. How does this happen? God will use the circumstances of our lives, whatever may be occurring, for the good of our souls except we have the habit of resisting! We want our minds to be transformed as long as that transformation is painless and quite exciting. Look at me becoming a new person!!!

But personal growth and transformation usually come through trials and tribulations when we reach out for God and seek his grace.

So. Why don't we journey with Joseph? Let's take time to read the story and as we notice all that is happening and who Joseph is becoming, we allow the Holy Spirit access to the places in us most in need of transformation.

Who knows? By the time we are ready to re-enter the transformed church building, we might be a completely different to the people we were when we left it!