

Genesis 37:2-36

Joseph and his technicolour dreams

History, Karl Marx said, is always doomed to repeat itself – the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

The idea of the repetition of history is a pretty common one. Both Hinduism and Buddhism teach an essentially cyclical view of world history; in fact many of their adherents believe that even individual people may be repeated through reincarnation.

And when you look at lots of things that go on in our world, from the history of Western powers invading Iraq and Afghanistan (the British are on their fourth occupation of the latter in 170 years) to the banking crisis (1720, 1763, 1890, 1929, 1973, 2008...) it does seem that more or less the same events happen again and again in the national life of politics and economics.

Many Christians, however, reject the idea that history goes in cycles as a pagan myth. Web sites confidently proclaim that cyclical history is a “myth” and that there is “no real evidence” for it. Such Christians, perhaps to their surprise, have a view of history that more or less fits with that of arch-atheist Richard Dawkins and many, though by no means all, of his neo-Darwinist friends. Dawkins says that “adaptive evolution is...deeply, dyed-in-the-wool, indispensably progressive.”

So which is it? Does history move in a line according to the clear and progressive will of God, or perhaps according to the inevitable forces of evolution? Or does it repeat itself, coming again and again to the same triumphs and disasters?

What kind of things ought we expect in our lives? Change and movement? Or cycles and repetition?

The answer that we find in Genesis 37 is, as you might have guessed, both. But it's not a pretty picture. Because the thing that massively repeats itself in history and the end to which human history runs in this chapter is not a nice one. It is a history full of repeated wickedness, sin and folly which leads to ever greater wickedness, sin and folly.

In this, the first chapter of Genesis dedicated to Jacob's descendents we are going to see the endlessness of sin and the culmination of sin. The endlessness of sin and the culmination of sin.

First...

1 The endlessness of sin – repeating our folly

Jacob's upbringing hadn't, to be honest, been a particularly happy one. Rejected by his father Isaac in favour of his more macho older brother Esau, Jacob had spent most of the most energetic years of his life in exile from his family after tricking his father into giving him a blessing that his father wanted to give to Esau – even though Esau had foolishly sold the birthright blessing to Jacob! In this mess of family relationships Jacob was assisted by his mother Rebekah who, for reasons we simply don't know, preferred her more homely son Jacob

to the outdoor loving Esau. After Jacob fled the family home over two decades passed when Jacob didn't see his brother or father; and he never saw his mother again.

But what is almost the first thing we are told about Jacob's relationship with his children? V3: Israel (Jacob's other name!) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age.” Joseph was Jacob's 11th son and the first-born of Rachel his favourite wife. You might wonder why Benjamin, the youngest boy, wasn't his favourite? The most likely reasons seems to be that it is the firstborn who has a place of privilege, and Joseph is Rachel's firstborn and also that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin; he must have been a constant reminder to Jacob of what he lost as well as what he gained.

But, whatever the reasons, Jacob surely ought to have known that such favouritism was always going to lead to tension, strife and, quite probably disaster.

Jacob treats Joseph, the younger son, as he wanted to be treated by his own father even though knew through bitter personal experience the impact that would have on his other sons.

He even makes him a robe. Not a stripy coat as depicted in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical but a jewelled gown. A richly ornamented outer garment fit for a king. Because that's what Jacob was doing by making this coat for Joseph. This was the robe of a ruler. The coat of a king. Jacob was, quite clearly and knowingly, setting Joseph up as the ruler of his brothers. He was anointing him as the clan chief for the next generation.

And just as Isaac's preference for Esau over Jacob spills over into bitter rivalry and hatred so it is here.

The tension is ratcheted up by four events in the first 11 verses, each of which serve to make the brothers' relationship more and more strained. First Joseph brings a bad report, literally an evil saying, about some of his brothers. Whatever they had done Joseph exaggerated and embellished it so that it sounded worse than it really was. Then Jacob presents the royal coat and then Joseph shares his two dreams.

By v11 they are “jealous” of him. That might not sound worse than “hating” him but, in the original Hebrew of Genesis it definitely is. This is an irrational, murderous hatred. Jealousy can be a terrible thing. The covetous man might want to have a woman. The jealous man will ensure that if he can't have her nobody else will either.

Jacob and Joseph repeat the mistakes of the previous generation

Then Joseph's brothers, having slaughtered the men of Shechem in a cowardly and bloody massacre repeat their folly by taking their flocks in the same direction. As Joseph headed up there he must have thought he was in danger from the locals who had much reason to hate his family. Instead the local man offers him helpful directions; and it is his own brothers who plot to kill him.

As they do so, of course, they repeat the sin of Cain, the first man born and first murderer, who also killed his brother.

Finally having sold their brother into slavery the brothers persuade Jacob that Joseph is already dead, deceiving him using a goat's blood and a coat, just as Jacob in turn had deceived his own father using a goat's meat and a coat.

The endless misery and folly of sin and evil rolls through history, as people like Isaac and Jacob and you and I repeat endlessly the sins perpetrated against us by others. The abused child turns paedophilic, the bullied boy becomes a dictator, the pupil of wickedness becomes the teacher of evil.

This morning you and I need to make sure that we are not deceived by the myth of progress. Because new generations, new abilities and new technology do not mean progress of any sort that really counts... Here's how John Gray, professor at the London School of Economics, put it in an article from 1999 that seems even more relevant today than it did when he first wrote it:

“there is no consistent, enduring link between the adoption of modern science and technology on the one hand and the progress of reason in human affairs on the other. If anything, new technologies can give a new lease of life to the side of human nature that is not and will never be rational. The Taliban commander directing military operations from his cellular telephone is a familiar late 20th-century figure.”

And an even more familiar one 10 years in to the 21st century, along with Iranian nuclear centrifuges and international mega-banks bringing ruin to whole economies.

Progress has come in so many ways; as many of our health-care professionals know the ability of medicine to relieve suffering in the final weeks and days of life has never been greater. And yet has the clamour to allow us to kill ourselves or others even been greater?

History repeats itself. Because the wickedness, sin and evil in the human heart remains constant from generation to generation. You are no better than your parents or they than theirs. We may have some minor differences in our moral blind spots perhaps. But which is worse? The person born at the end of the 19th century who imagined that black Africans were less human than white people and kept them in poverty and subjugation. Or the person born at the end of the 20th century who says that black Africans are the same as us and yet participates in a massive global system that keeps them, still, in poverty and subjugation?

We are no better. The same sins. The same injustices. The same evil is repeated again and again and again. And we have got to face up to that. Because if we believe in progress we cannot believe in salvation. Or rather if we believe in progress we will believe that progress IS salvation.

If we believe in progress we will believe that all we have to do to make the world how it should be is work hard at whatever our idea of progress is and wait.

The lie that we could make the world OK through progress was what the rationalists believed in the 18th century. It was the same lie that was perpetuated by the Great Exhibition and the British empire in the 19th century until the slaughter WW1 put an end to it. The same lie that was reinvented by the communists with their commitment to a new age when the honest of the workers would bring goodness and prosperity to all. And when the workers turned out to include a Stalin the lie was re-spun by the capitalists who said that the market would allow us to make progress, but instead it just made a few rich people both richer and greedier.

The only way to make you realise that you need a saviour, that you need to be rescued, is to see that there is no hope of escape on your own. Only once you have tried and failed to climb out of the pit of sin, as Joseph must have tried and failed to climb out of the cistern he was dumped into by his brothers, will you see that you need someone else to come and save you.

The lesson of history, written here in Genesis 37 in the repeated folly of the generations of the children of Abraham and written in massive letters through all human history is that sin is endless. Or evil repeats itself. We do the same wicked things as our fathers, who in turn rebelled against God in the same way as our grandfathers.

Sin is endless.

And, secondly, sin has a climax...

2 The culmination of sin – rejecting God's ruler

For all that lots of things in this story are quite deliberately told to us to emphasise that the brothers and their father are repeating the sin of previous generations that is not all that is happening here.

This is not just more of the same, it is an escalating rejection. For the first time in history there is a conspiracy to kill the person God has chosen to be the saviour of his people.

How do we know that Joseph was marked out for such a role? Well it's here that we see the importance of the dreams. Joseph has two dreams, the first of three pairs of dreams in the story of his life and, interestingly, the first dreams in the Bible in which God does not speak.

Dreams, in the ancient world, were a well known to be a source of communication between heaven and earth. Even pagan Pharaoh understood that, as we'll see in a few weeks time.

And when Joseph tells his dreams, first to his brothers and, later, to his brothers and his father, there was no doubt in their minds about the meaning of the dreams. They, with Joseph, realise that what the dream of their sheaves of corn bowing down to his and the sun, moon and stars bowing before him, are all about him being in charge.

The brothers do not think that this is just about Joseph's massive ego, even though I does seem he is rather up himself about it all. They, with their Father, know perfectly well that these dreams are prophetic.

In fact although Jacob rebukes Joseph for sharing his second dream, all Joseph is doing is saying exactly what Jacob himself has symbolised by giving him the richly ornamented royal robe.

And look at what happens when they plot against Joseph... They see him coming, because he is wearing the coat, sign of his future rule. And they plan to kill him saying, v20, "then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

I think they know that the role Joseph is marked out for is not his idea, it's not even their father's idea. It's God's idea.

Later on we'll see that Joseph was aware that a repeated dream mean something had been fixed by God and could not be altered. That would have been the understanding of the brothers too. If they thought that Joseph's dreams were merely his own overactive subconscious they could have safely ignored him as a crackpot. They could have laughed off his pretensions as nothing more than the foolish imaginings of a teenage lad. Their plan to thwart his dreams must come from a real sense that, unless they do something about it, the dreams will come true and they will have to bow before him.

That's the background. They want to avoid being ruled by the one God has chosen as king. So what do they do?

They strip him naked.
They celebrate getting rid of him.
They hand him over to God's enemies to – as if they can somehow avoid responsibility for his death by merely selling him as a slave, even though that was just as bad a crime.
They sell him for pieces of silver.
Even the person you might expect to stand by him turns out to be a coward who, at the critical moment, does not know which way to turn.

And why? Well it seems that somehow these brothers imagine they can replace Joseph in his father's affections and acquire the importance and inheritance that belonged to him.

There is no doubt that this spectacular crime, which is in some ways the climax of all the sins committed since Genesis 3 is deliberately presented to us as where sin leads. It combines the jealous of Cain's murder of Abel, the unjustified violence of Lamech, the arrogance of Babel, the feasting of Lot's daughters, the deceitfulness of Abraham and Jacob and the lust for what I want right now of Esau.

And the place where all those things come together? In killing God's anointed ruler.

But this terrible sin isn't the last or biggest in the cycle. In fact it is just a shadow of an even greater crime that will be committed against God's future king. This time a ruler who is equally anointed by God but without the foolish

arrogance of Joseph. A king who is not boastful of his status but who cloaks his glory in weakness and humility.

His name was Jesus.
He was God's anointed king.

They stripped him.
The inhabitants of the earth gloat and send each other gifts because his message tormented those who live on the earth
They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. He has Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.
They counted out for Judas thirty silver coins.
Peter began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man."

The climax of sin comes when people reject God's ruler.

But fortunately, amazingly, that is not the end of the story. Not the end of the story for Joseph and his brothers, not the end of the story for us. As far as Jacob knows, Joseph has been devoured. As far as the brothers are concerned Joseph is as good as dead; slaves didn't last very long in the ancient world and he's certainly not going to be coming back with his dreams any time soon. But we know that Joseph is not dead...

3 Beyond sin? God's king dies, but does not die, so others can live

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Joseph is sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

Back home it looks as though everything has gone totally wrong. The brother's plan to replace Joseph in their Jacob's affections is a disaster. Now the old man is in permanent mourning and will not be comforted. They have done great evil and brought no benefit to themselves.

That's how it was with Christ's death too. The Jewish leaders took great pains to have him arrested. Judas handed him over. And how did it end up? Judas killed himself and the Jewish leaders alienated what little good will they had with Pilate. Nobody gained.

It all looked hopeless and futile and pointless. But it wasn't.

Because as Judah and his co-conspirators sold Joseph to the Ishmaelite slaves traders another will was at work. Joseph might have seemed as good as dead. But it was through his journey into death as a slave of the great power of Egypt that God would bring about, in due time, salvation for Jacob and his sons.

If Joseph, the anointed king, had not been sold as a slave the people of God would have been without hope. The next time they see Joseph he is resurrected from the place of death as a glorious king who will provide what they need to live.

Good Friday looked hopeless. The one God had sent into the world, the divine person of the Son who had clothed himself in flesh to make God known, was crucified and buried. But it was through his journey into death at the

hands of the forces of evil that od would bring about, in due time, salvation for the world.

If Jesus, the Christ, the anointed king, had not been executed as a common criminal the people of God would have been without hope. The next time we see Jesus he is resurrected from the place of death as a glorious king who provides all that we need to live.

What is history like? Well yes it is circular. It repeats itself again and again as generation after generation, people just like you and me, commit the same stupid, inexcusable sins as those who have gone before. The world is not, morally, getting any better, and all our wonderful progress merely provides us with more and more tools to steal and kill and destroy.

But history is also linear. History is going somewhere. It reaches its low point, the worst of all moments, as God's anointed king is killed for a few pounds.

But that is not the end. Because God's king lives. And in the wonderful and remarkable grace of God he provides, by his death, everything that we need to live.

This week, in your home, your office, your classroom, surgery, factory, hospital, laboratory or wherever God takes you, you need to know that history is cyclical. You need to know that the moaning about and condemnation of politicians, figures from history, foreigners, bosses or the competition that you will hear from the newspapers, your colleagues, the TV and your friends is totally unjustified – because we are just the same. We are in need of mercy and grace just like everyone else in human history.

And this week you need to know that history is linear. That human rebellion against God and his standards, your rebellion and mine, led to us, with the sons of Jacob, the Jewish council, Pilate and the disciples getting rid of God's king because we cannot stand the idea that he should rule over us.

Most of all this week you need to know that God's king is not dead; but now lives and can provide all we need to live as well.

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