

Be God's blessing

Genesis 46:28 - 47:12

In the last few days of our team's trip to Tanzania last year, I was restless. We'd been there for nearly two weeks - half a dozen of us from the church, half a dozen from Inverness Royal Academy, and our leaders. It had been a wonderful time; and there was purpose in me being there just like everyone else. But I was restless.

It was beginning to feel not right - being away from Heather, away from my children. I began more and more to feel that need to be reunited with them. And I knew from contact with Heather that it was the same back home. The kids weren't doing great with me being away. Everything was unsettled, difficult, not as it should be.

And in that moment that the minibus arrived back at the school after what felt like the longest drive back from Edinburgh I'd ever had... in that moment that I caught a glimpse of their faces again, and they saw my weathered, tired face too... in that moment, the need for our reunion was both emotionally clear and wonderfully happening *right then*.

I could see on the faces of my wife and children, before any of us could say much, just how much more right things were now that I was with them. And I'm sure they could see it on my face too. There was water in all our eyes. That reunion felt like just the most important thing. And soon after that, life carried on. Like it should. Like it worked. Like we were able to bless each other and the people around us once again.

Something like that is happening in what we read today in Genesis 46:28-47:12. There's a reunion between father and son, Jacob and Joseph, a stirring moment as we head towards the curtain falling on this story. And following that reunion, both Joseph and Jacob are enabled to live the way that God had called this family to - as blessings to the people around them.

The whole story has been building up to this reunion moment since we started back in Genesis 37. Jacob sent Joseph off to check on his brothers, expecting him back for dinner, but instead losing Joseph for 22 years, along with the hope of ever seeing him again.

As the story has gone on, Jacob has appeared to be a broken man, a shadow of what he had been and was meant to be. Joseph has been different - patient, strong, discerning of what God was doing, ready to use

what God had given him in the places that God put him. But we have heard from Joseph as he has spoken with his brothers of his deep concern to see his dad again. 'Is our father still alive?' 'How is our father?' 'Go, fetch dad and come back to me again with him.'

This reunion matters to both of them, and it's going to change both of them. First there's the build up - in v.28, Jacob sends Judah ahead to scout things out and make arrangements with Joseph. We've been following Judah's spin-off story too - now he's well and truly been given that role of leadership, invested with that trust, and here's a final duty for Judah to perform in the story before his named role in this story is done.

Meanwhile, in v.29, Joseph's getting a chariot ready to leave the political headquarters of Pharaoh's palace to meet his family - and his father! - in the region of Goshen, where this family was ultimately to settle. Here's the scene then - father heading towards son, son heading towards father - and then, after 22 years of separation, finally they meet.

Before there are any words, there are tears. For a long time, just tears, and an embrace. Joseph flings his arms around this dad that he has so much missed and longed for. This was the prime minister, and he couldn't give a stuff about how he appeared in that moment. Undignified, unlooked, totally unconcerned about open mouths or wagging tongues. *All* he cared about was that he was reunited with dad.

Once again, the story points us forward to one that Jesus tells hundreds of years later. The story of a son heading back towards a Father he'd left behind. But in this story, it's the *Father* who is *running*, undignified, unconcerned about how it looked, to meet the child walking towards him. It's the *Father* who flings His arms around the son He has so longed to have back. It's the *Father* who almost hushes the rehearsed apologies of his wayward child so that He can simply *hug* him, and cry tears of the joy of reunion in that moment.

If by now you haven't sensed God telling you that this means something for you, let me spell it out for you: God the Father wants to be reunited with *you*. He *loves* you. Your absence from Him has been hard. It's been hard for you; you have not been your true self. You'll see that as soon as God's Spirit softens you enough to see it. And God has longed for the day that you would walk towards Him, ready to meet, ready to embrace.

We've talked a fair bit in recent weeks in this story about reconciliation. The shake up before the make up. That sense that God's Spirit has to shake you up to see your need for forgiveness and your need of God, before true reunion and relationship with Him can happen.

This morning I want to say to many of you - the shake up has happened. You know it. God has arrested your attention. You should know this too - He's already *done* everything to make your reconciliation with Him happen. Jesus paid every debt you owed God, dying on a cross so that *all* you need to do now is walk to Him. Walk to the Father who is running to embrace you, cry tears of joy over you, and share His life forever with you.

Just like Jacob and Joseph, then, there's no need for words to start this. The words will follow after. Just now, let's have a quiet moment. And I invite every one of you to walk towards Father God, ready for a reunion with Him. And I pray that as we do that now, for at least one of us today, your life will be changed forever in meeting Him, embracing, maybe even letting tears fall, and saying nothing.

Quiet moment

Then the words do come. In v.30; it's Jacob who speaks. He looks at Joseph, his precious child. The face is so different now - a man, not a boy. Furrows on the brow borne of years of prison, and then the demands of high office in high crisis. A wisdom in the eyes in place of the youthful zeal that once sparkled there. But the face is the same. The same contours, the same smile. The same crease around the eyes in that smile that reminded Jacob of Joseph's mother.

'Now I am ready to die, since I have seen for myself that you are still alive.'

As it turned out, Jacob would live another 17 years, seeing his boy mature to middle age, and living life with the whole surviving family reunited. He'd experienced the one thing that was top of his bucket list, one thing that he never dreamed would have been possible, because he thought that Joseph was dead - yet here he was.

Is there something like this for you? Is there something that hasn't yet happened in your life, your family, this town, this church, in some other area; about which you could say if it did happen: 'Now I am ready to die, since I have seen this'?

With that question let me, like the broadcasters on election night, add a few caveats. Firstly, I'm not talking about your bucket list of interesting things to try. This isn't about swimming with dolphins or meeting your celebrity hero. This is about the meaningful burdens of your heart. Secondly, it's entirely possible that you don't have something like this. And thirdly, God hasn't *promised* you in Scripture that you'll get this thing.

But it is an incredible blessing when it does come, so perhaps we should ask. Why not? After all, if you do get this blessing, it doesn't mean you're going to drop dead - old man Jacob lived another 17 years!

We *do* read of someone in the Bible being told by the Holy Spirit that they wouldn't die before seeing something. In Luke 2, an 8 day old Jesus is presented in the temple. And when the child was passed round into Simeon's arms, he said, 'God, I'm ready to die, now that I have seen what your Spirit told me I would see - the Christ, the Messiah, the King and Rescuer you were to send into this world. I've seen Him! Here He is! And now I'm ready to go.'

What is the thing about which, if you saw this happen, you could say: 'I'm ready to die now'?

I said earlier on that, once you've experienced the reunion that needed to happen, you can live the kind of life you were made to live - a life of bringing blessing to those around you. Now we're going to expand on that a little, watching Joseph and Jacob closely.

These men, like their fathers before them, belonged to a family who belonged to God; to whom God had said to succeeding generations - 'I will be your God and you will be my people; I will bless you and bless those around you through you.'

Once you've experienced a reunion with God the Father, you will find that life's different. Here's one huge difference - you belong to God, you're part of His family. That becomes your defining identity. Not your job, your tastes, your ambitions, your romances or your postcode; but the fact that you are God's child.

When you live in the freedom, acceptance and security of *that* - you become secure and free about becoming a blessing to people around you. Because you don't have to secure anything for yourself, or bless yourself - God's done that for you. So you can notice whom God has put in your life, and use your energies to bless them.

Here's how Joseph did it. From 46:31 through to 47:6, we read about Joseph arranging things for his family to be safe, secure and provided for in this new land. He's thought through details about where they could live, how they could speak to the authorities about it, what he could say on their behalf as their advocate.

Why is all this thought and planning necessary? It's in a little detail in v.34: 'all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.' And shepherding was what the firm Jacob & Sons did for a living. Joseph was concerned about these people he loved being rejected, ill treated and unprovided for. So he thought carefully about how he could use the position God had put him in to bless them.

The comment about 'shepherds being detestable to the Egyptians' bears some scrutiny for Bible commentators. There is no evidence in contemporary Egyptian literature that the profession of shepherding was looked down upon. But dig a little deeper into Egypt's history, and you find there was a time where Semitic people (like Jacob and his family) came in from foreign lands and ruled certain regions of Egypt. These 'hyksos' people are referred to in some ancient history texts as 'shepherd-kings.' And there were a certain xenophobic feeling in Egypt in that time about 'people like that.'

Jacob and his family were immigrants. Stereotyped by the work they did, and the place they'd come from. 'Coming over here, taking our land... taking our jobs...' There was suspicion about 'people like that.' History about 'people like that.' A wary racism dressed up with a respectable sounding rationale that was really founded in fear. Sounds all too familiar, right?

So after experiencing the blessing of reunion, the way that Joseph goes on to 'be a blessing' to his family has much to teach us about how we can 'be a blessing' to those who get ignored and rejected by the society we live in. Joseph does four things for his family in these verses (and also in vv.11-12).

He advocates for them - speaking to Pharaoh, pleading on their behalf where they had no voice. He secures a safe home for them - the land of Goshen, a good place to stay where those who would despise or mistreat them would stay well clear of. He secures familiar employment for them - shepherding and livestock. And, very basically in this time of crisis, He secures food for them - sufficient to the needs of the whole family.

And Joseph does all of this without concern for his reputation. Remember, he's the prime minister of the powerful nation of Egypt. And he speaks up for his family of immigrant shepherds. He's not ashamed to be associated with them. He's not embarrassed that this is who his family is. *All* that matters is being reunited with his father, and then tending to the needs of his whole family.

Now you might say, 'Yeah, but that's the thing, it was his *family* after all. And you do anything for family, right?' Well, do you? Remember, if you've had a reunion with God the Father, you belong to Him and you're part of His family now. Are you ashamed of being associated with anyone in the family? It doesn't take long reading the Bible to find that God's not ashamed to have the people that the world rejects in His home. So let's not be ashamed to bless and love people into God's family in this way.

Advocacy - being a voice on behalf of the voiceless that we know. Securing a safe home for those who don't have one. Securing familiar employment that fits with a person's skills, ability, experience. And providing food to those who need food!

How could you do some of this for someone you know? Are there others doing these things that you could lend your support to?

Then there's Jacob. Jacob's experience of blessing others after his watershed reunion is a bit different. After Joseph presents five of his brothers to Pharaoh (maybe the most impressive five to make a good impression; maybe the least impressive five in order to avoid them being conscripted as soldiers in Pharaoh's army), Joseph presents his father Jacob in v.7.

And we read an odd thing. *Jacob blessed Pharaoh*. The odd thing there is that here is the one in an inferior position, Jacob; verbally offering a blessing to the one in a superior position, Pharaoh.

Some commentators make the point that Jacob is an old man, and unlike our society which neglects and derides old people all too easily, Ancient Near Eastern culture highly respected and revered the elderly. So for Jacob to offer Pharaoh a blessing is not extraordinary.

But there's no getting away from what other commentators point out - this is an immigrant shepherd, in an extremely vulnerable life-on-the-line position, meeting a man who keeps getting told by his people that he's a god. There's no doubt who the one to bestow blessing or anything else 'should' be.

But here's Jacob *blessing* Pharaoh at the start of their conversation. He's at it again as *he* closes the conversation in v.10. And what we can learn from Jacob as people who have experienced reunion with God the Father is this - that we both *presume* to bless, and we *choose* to bless, the people with whom God brings us into contact and relationship.

We *presume* to bless others. The family and friends in our lives may not be asking for blessings - whether our prayers, our gifts, our hospitality, our practical help, our time. Indeed, some of the people in our lives might think of themselves as the ones whose role it is to bless *you*.

But as God's children, reunited with Him, we are to presume to be a blessing to others. Remember the family identity, and the family business: 'I will be your God, and you will be my people... I will bless you and bless those around you through you.'

So if you're going through hell with your health and your friends are rallying around you; you still presume to ask them how they are and how you can pray for them. If you're dependent on the care of others in some way, you can still presume to bless them too - not as payback, nor even as thanks, but as a regular rhythm of being God's blessing to them.

If you're passed over for a promotion or a job and you know the person who got it, you write them a card to say 'well done' and maybe throw in a gift. Maybe you ask them how you can support them; maybe you move on graciously.

If someone's struggling in the street, and there's dozens of people that you're hoping might help first, you remember, 'hang on, I'm God's person here; I'm going to presume to be the blessing.' You step in and help.

Don't let position or circumstances or 'how it's always worked' prevent this - start presuming to be a blessing to those around you at the school gates, the office, the house, the wider family.

And *choose* to be a blessing. Choose it instead of bitterness and withering. You see, when you've experienced reunion with God the Father, you can do that. You can let go of the imprisoning pain and bitterness of the circumstances that have marked your life, and be free to be a blessing instead. That's what Jacob did here.

Pharaoh, intrigued by just how old this old rascal with the mischief rekindled in his eye is, asks Jacob in v.8. And all Jacob says is this: 'The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers.' Then it's 'Be blessed, Pharaoh' and off he goes.

Jacob reflects on his life in these two sentences. He sees his life here not as a kind of main event, but as a 'pilgrimage.' A journey through. Literally from the Hebrew, a 'sojourn.' Throughout Genesis, dwelling means setting up and investing in a place permanently, and 'sojourning' means you're just here for now, moving through.

Jacob sees his life in this world as a sojourn, a heading through on the way. Now our church's motto is 'Here for Life.' Like Jacob in Egypt, there's a settling down to be genuinely here for the long haul, investing in this place and its people. But there's ultimately a pointing beyond in this.

That real, permanent life is not in this life at all. We're in the tent just now. The palace that we're really headed for is beyond the sojourn of our one hundred and thirty years, or our seventy years, or our thirty years, or whatever God gives us.

But on this journey, Jacob chooses to bless along the way. To bless those he crosses paths with on the way. To bless those he sojourns in this life with. And he chooses to bless, despite the other thing he reflects on. 'My years have been few and difficult.'

Few? Really? 130?!? Well, as Jacob points out, it's less than his forefathers got. But he's saying more than this. His years haven't been defined with fullness like theirs were, but rather emptiness. His life has been marked more by suffering than joy; more by struggles than pleasant times; more by tears than laughter.

And yet, now that Jacob has experienced the reunion he needed, he *chooses* to bless. He's *able* to do that now. He recognises God's *call* upon him to do that. So he does it. And instead of bitterness and closed-in-ness, Jacob opens a hand of blessing to those who watch and marvel at this enduring man who points to the God of his fathers and says, 'May God bless *you*.'

Presume to be a blessing. And choose to be a blessing. All because you've been made able to do that by the Father with whom you are reunited. And because He calls you to do that as one of His family.