
Bible Study: Diocesan Conference 2025
Canon Miriam Beercroft.

Gweddïwn, Lord, as we gather together, we turn to your Word, your voice and your purpose... Deuwn i ddarllen dy air, i wrando am dy lais, ac i ddimad dy bwrpas. Agor ein llygaid i'th presenoldeb; agor ein bywydau i'th ras a'th nerth. [We come to read your word, to listen to your voice and to discern your purpose. Open our eyes to your presence, open our lives to your grace and power.] Amen.

Volunteering at a Trailffest half marathon in Meirionnydd a couple of weeks ago, I noticed some very young children holding homemade signs saying, "Da iawn Anti Caz!" As more and more children assembled along the route, all similar in age, I realised that whoever Anti Caz was, she probably didn't have that many nieces and nephews, but rather lots of adoring children from her place of work, presumably a Cylch Meithrin, where all the leaders are known as Anti. (I also felt sorry for the other hundred runners who didn't have anywhere near as many cheerleaders as the clearly much-loved Anti Caz!)

Seeing them, I was reminded that when I was growing up in Merseyside I had 2 real aunties, 3 great aunties, and 3 plasy (or plastic) aunties – ladies of my parents' generation who were no relation, but were very much a key part of my life. Auntie Jean, Auntie Jane and Auntie Frankie were my Sunday School teachers. They would teach me songs, and stories from the Bible, and they would teach me to pray, (aided by the only technology available to them at the time: some hand-written acetates and an overhead projector, and some cassette tape backing tracks recorded by my own Dad on a little keyboard!) I can still remember the words, the actions, and more importantly the feeling in my heart that the words were absolutely true – that God's love for me and His strength and might were beyond description and entirely trustworthy. I have never doubted that for even an hour of my life.

Auntie Jean not only taught the Sunday School, she also organised coach trips from our church hall to the theatre. (She probably still does!) And it's thanks to Auntie Jean that I saw Jason Donovan in the Liverpool Empire, starring as Joseph in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. It was 1991; this was my first experience of live musical theatre and I was hooked! We bought the illustrated book, and the LP of the show soundtrack, and consequently, I was able to learn a lot of the lyrics!

Over 30 years later, we've been looking at the Genesis story of Joseph during our Monday meditation services in Machynlleth. A small group of us spend an hour listening to worship music, meditating on a portion of scripture, and discussing its impact on our discipleship. Reading through the story as written in Scripture (rather than the lyrics penned by Tim Rice), we've been able to take the story at a gentler pace than the rock'n'roll Andrew Lloyd-Webber tempo, and although the abridged, musical version has helped me and millions of others remember the key facts of the story, a few details have struck me afresh as we've gone along chapter by chapter.

Favourite son Joseph, having received prophetic dreams and shared them with his family, was perceived to be the most spoilt, egotistical little brother and considered to be intolerable, to the point of his brothers almost killing him. Reconsideration led to his being sold as a slave and his brothers just *pretending he was dead*. Anyhow, they would never have to listen to his nonsense or put up with the inequality again, (or so they thought). Joseph's life as a slave went from bad to worse as he

was falsely accused and imprisoned. He used his gift for interpreting dreams to help two other imprisoned servants, one of whom was *supposed* to put in a good word for Joseph, but inconveniently forgot all about him for several years until Pharaoh himself got freaked out by a weird dream and was desperate for an interpretation. Joseph was summoned, had a quick wash and a shave, gave the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream and landed himself the most important job going.

Read Genesis 41.46-52

Reading it properly, over a number of Monday meditation sessions, I've found that the story is even more emotional than I had remembered; the characters are even more dysfunctional; and the pain even more realistic than an up-beat theatre production could portray. Joseph's transformation occurred both over years and overnight. The abuse he'd suffered at the hands of his brothers was supposedly justified by the favouritism lavished over him by his father Jacob, but that clearly was not something Joseph had brought upon himself. The way he was treated by people who were supposed to be family was NOT OK! In today's terminology and headlines, we would say he was the victim of abuse. Really mis-treated by his family. Awful.

And that's when it hit me, in the verses when Joseph's life took a sudden overnight improvement, that things not only got remarkably better for him, but, we can see in the way he named his sons, that after a prolonged season of suffering, he was able to acknowledge God's hand in his circumstances, and he was able, by the grace of God to put some stuff behind him:

Enwodd Joseff ei gyntafanedig Manasse — "Am fod Duw wedi peri imi anghofio fy holl gyny a holl dylwyth fy nhad." Enwodd yr ail Effraim — "Am fod Duw wedi fy ngwneud i'n ffrwythlon yng ngwlad fy ngorthrymder."

Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

This wasn't the happy ever after quite yet. There was more difficulty to come...

The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. (Gen 41:51-54)

We know, from reading on in Genesis, that Joseph wasn't well and truly over it all with his father and his brothers. When they appeared in front of him – the brothers who'd sold him, abandoning him as good as dead, whom he never thought he'd see again, and vice versa, the way he behaves indicates that actually, there are still some trust issues there. The past hasn't been completely deleted. The scars of his abuse affect his behaviour, of course they do. However, I believe there's something healthy about naming the suffering and also naming God in the middle of it, as Joseph did in choosing names for his sons. - Acknowledging the affliction and at the same time acknowledging that God is there with you in the midst of it, and by God's grace, equips you to be fruitful!

Enwodd yr ail mab Effraim — "Am fod Duw wedi fy ngwneud i'n ffrwythlon yng ngwlad fy ngorthrymder." [He named his second son Ephraim] "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

To name his sons by the significance of what God had done in His life, is very cool. Because when you name a child, that name becomes as important to you as it does to the child bearing that name. Joseph would be reminded of the goodness of God, and the fruitfulness God had enabled in his life every single time he said his sons' names.

“Ephraim, stop kicking your brother!” “Manasseh, come back to the table please, you haven’t finished your vegetables!” “Ephraim, will you tidy up this room before someone breaks their neck on these toys all over the floor...” (I mean, Joseph’s top job was second only to the Pharaoh, it’s reasonable to guess that his children weren’t short of things to play with!)

I think it’s wonderful that considering what he had endured, Joseph was able to see that God had made him fruitful and he was able to name and claim God’s faithfulness throughout that long time of hardship. God had clearly been at work in Joseph’s life from his childhood onwards. The dreams, and the interpretations of those dreams about his brothers bowing down to him, whilst they got him into deep trouble, were nevertheless remarkable for a young person to receive, and I wonder how often he thought about them later in prison. During those long, lonely days and nights, was he still dreaming of sheaves of corn and of the sun and the moon and stars bowing down to him? Is that what sustained him and kept his faith alive? We don’t know. But his ability to receive prophetically from God was there in his very young days, and proved to be a curse long before the gift proved to be a blessing.

In time, (and it often does take an unpredictable length of time), our afflictions can be worked through, God can enable us to put bad things behind us. He is the God of new beginnings, and when Joseph named his sons, I think he was at a turning point of being ready to start putting the past behind him, to serve God in a new way, and to see how God was making him fruitful in that service. That new chapter would have its own challenges, of distributing the food (a work of administration) and also attending to the broken relationships in his family (a personal, pastoral work).

I hope you’ve jumped ahead, and seen the parallels I see. Like Joseph, we have administrative challenges to work through and at the same time we need to be reconciled to one another where relationships are strained. This work is well underway, but not completed yet. Can we seek the blessing of godly wisdom that Joseph had, to be wise administrators moving forward into a new chapter through gracious reconciliation?

Erbyn ein cyfarfod nesaf, dylai fod gennym dîm arweinyddiaeth newydd yn ei le. Esgob newydd, ysgrifennydd esgobaethol newydd, y ddau yn gweithio ochr yn ochr â’n deon newydd a phob un ohonom yn gweithio gyda’n gilydd. [By the time of our next gathering, we should have a new leadership team in place. A new bishop, a new diocesan secretary both working alongside our new dean and each of us working together.] Let us all open our hearts to the work of God’s Holy Spirit, for it is God who reconciles us to Himself and to one another.

Gadewch inni weddïo gyda’n gilydd, dros ein gilydd, fel brodyr a chwiorydd yn esgobaeth Bangor. [Let us pray together, for each other, as brothers and sister in Bangor diocese.]

Holy Trinity – We thank you for Joseph’s story – for the restoration that you worked in him over many years, and for the fruitfulness that came of his faith and trust in You.

We come to you at the beginning of our conference seeking the guidance of Your Holy Spirit to lead us into a fresh chapter.... We acknowledge our need to personally be reconciled to you and to one another, and the need for us to each be honest about our hurts, for where things have gone badly wrong, there is pain.

Save us from being like Joseph’s brothers, discordant and dysfunctional.

As we open our hearts to your love and power, make us brothers and sisters who are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

As we heal, bring us new leadership – a bishop and a diocesan secretary whom You have called and equipped for the tasks ahead of us, and make us fruitful in our evangelism as we seek to worship you, love your world and grow your church. **Amen.**