

Family Reunion

Genesis 42-47, Acts 7:9-16; Matthew 22:23-32

'TwiXt the optimist and the pessimist the difference is droll

The optimist sees the doughnut but the pessimist sees the hole.

How would you describe yourself, are you a glass half full or a glass half empty kind of person? I have to say I've always thought that was the wrong question, the better question is "Who drank the rest of my drink?" But that is another matter.

*The optimist feels that this is the best of possible worlds,
the pessimist fears that he is right.*

How do you look at the world? If you look up quotes on this topic it is clear that most view optimism pessimistically. So for instance "A pessimist is someone who has lived with an optimist." Such quotes gave the impression that optimism is a fine thing but ultimately idealistic, pessimism is more responsible, more realistic. In fact the glass is half empty, and it's not even your drink, but it probably is your round.

It is easy for us to feel this way, to be pessimistic but today as we look at the climax of the story of Joseph, we will be encouraged to be realistic, to be responsible but will ultimately we will find promising grounds for optimism.

FAMILY REUNION – EVENTUALLY (GENESIS 42-47)

The story of Joseph being reunited with his family is well worth reading in full but we can only give a brief overview of all that happens.

At the end of Genesis 41 when we are told that a famine was severe in the whole world, this makes us as readers wonder what has happened to Jacob and family. As chapter 42 starts we discover that they are suffering and so Jacob sends his 10 eldest sons to Egypt so that they may not die. Here we see both the seriousness of the famine but also that the promises of God are under threat, once again the promise of descendants for Abraham is in jeopardy.

The brothers arrive in Egypt, and find themselves bowing before Joseph, who recognises them even if they don't him. Joseph has not seen his brothers for 22 years, he has no idea what has become of them, but their reappearance reminds him of his dreams. What has happened? Have they got rid of his younger brother as they did him? Perhaps they have even got rid of his father so Joseph interrogates them and although they plead that they have come from Canaan for food, he accuses them of being spies.

They are jailed and only allowed out if one stays in jail until the youngest brother is brought. They speak to each other that they are being punished because of what they did to Joseph while Reuben says "I told you not, but would you listen". They are unaware that Joseph can understand them as they had been speaking through an interpreter, and he is moved to tears. Recovering he binds Simeon and sends the others away.

The remaining brothers are rather disconcerted by finding their money has been returned. Arriving back in Canaan they report to Jacob who is "Not happy boys" in seemingly losing another son, he has embraced pessimism. (42:36)

Eventually because of the famine they have to return. Judah makes himself surety for Benjamin's safety. Stacked up with gifts from Canaan, the brothers come before Joseph who returns Simeon and offers to dine with them. The brothers, showing a touch of paranoia, assume they are for it and try to pay back the money that was

returned to them last time, but they are told to calm down. After another interview with Joseph they have a meal in the same room as him and are very unnerved to find they are sitting in order of birth.

Having got their provisions, they leave early in the morning only to have Joseph's steward chase them down accusing them of stealing Joseph's special cup. This is such a preposterous suggestion that the brothers say if caught the culprit will die and the rest be slaves. The steward, who knows where the cup is, makes the terms less frightening, only the culprit will be a slave. The cup is found in Benjamin's sack where Joseph had had it hidden, he wants to keep Benjamin away from his dangerous brothers that he does not yet trust.

This is where today's reading fits in, it is this speech by Judah, the longest in Genesis, that allows the resolution of the tension within the family. For here the previously heartless Judah shows great concern for Benjamin and for his father Jacob and offers himself in his place.

"Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father." (Genesis 44:33-34).

Joseph can now reveal himself for his brothers are changed from the jealous, hard hearted men of twenty years ago and shows how God has worked through all that has happened to bring salvation. "... do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. (Genesis 45:5).

Joseph instructs his brothers to move down to Egypt with their father so that they will be safe from the effects of the famine. Jacob is overjoyed to receive his "dead" son back and comes and settles in Egypt, thus reuniting the family and saving them from the famine. There is lots more in these chapters but I'll leave you to discover it when you read it for yourself.

BIBLICAL OPTIMISM

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY FOR GOOD

Summary of the Story – God meant this for good

As the story of Joseph comes to its climax we discover that the hero of the story is not Joseph at all, it is God. In Gen 45:4-11 three times Joseph says that God sent him to Egypt to save lives specifically to save the lives of his brothers (45:7). God has done this by making Joseph the slave lord of all Egypt.

The whole story of Joseph is one that shows how God overrules human activity, both good and evil, for his own saving purposes.

Is that how we view God? I wonder if we are more like the brothers who even when they get their silver back say with trembling "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28) As we read through this story we see what God's purposes are. Even in the most difficult of situations, in famine or family breakdowns, God is working to fulfil his promises to bring reconciliation, salvation and blessing

More grounds for biblical optimism

This pattern is worked out in the Bible again and again. Later readers of this story may have thought considering what happens later in Egypt that going there might not have been such a crash hot idea. But in Genesis 46 Jacob has a dream which requires no interpretation when God says "I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again." (Genesis 46:3-4).

Out of the slavery of Egypt God is working out his purposes. The readers of Genesis who were in exile in Babylon could have taken comfort from this teaching that even there with the nation seemingly defeated God would achieve his purposes.

Most dramatically God turned the disaster of Jesus' crucifixion, which looked like the final end of God's plans, into the triumph of Easter morning, even in the face of death there is biblical optimism. As our Gospel reading, and All Saints Day reminds us our God is the God of the living!

But we can be optimistic on a more global scale for the resurrection points to the time when God's kingdom will come, when even the most ardent pessimist will have nothing more to complain about! The optimist may say this is the best of all possible worlds, the pessimist may fear it is true, the Christian optimist knows that there is a better world coming.

We have good grounds for being biblical optimists for our God is sovereign and is working to bless ultimately all of creation.

STRUGGLING WITH OPTIMISM

However as I have spoken with a number of people about this idea during the week they have struggled with it, especially the choice of the word "optimism". The realities of life mean the pull to pessimism, realism, pragmatism is strong.

I don't know what you are going through and I would hate it to sound like I'm simply saying "Smile, God loves you"

Human Reality

The type of biblical optimism I'm suggesting is not blind to reality. As Joseph will say to his brothers in a later chapter "you intended to harm me but God intended it for good", the human intention, action and consequences are real and painful.

People will often say that everything happens for a reason, and often the reason is because people have made bad, selfish even evil choices, and sadly sometimes we will be those people. Like the brothers there may be times when we have to look past our optimistic reality of ourselves and fess up.

The biblical story underlines that even through such reality God can work for good.

The Path can be dark

Genesis also shows that the path of God's purposes can be dark. Joseph has 13 years of slavery and imprisonment, Jacob is bereaved, the brothers live with their guilt. It would be interesting to be able to interview the participants in the story and see what they think is going on. Yet clearly from our perspective God was forwarding his purposes. Likewise for us we may only see glimpses of God's ways, they may be completely opaque to us but God remains in charge working ultimately for blessing.

The Joseph story, and the whole biblical narrative shows that the path may be dark but the light of the end that God will bring should shine back and illuminate our path now. I do not want to suggest this is ever easy, but we should lift our eyes to that light.

LIVING WITH BIBLICAL OPTIMISM

This may not be enough to overcome the pessimist amongst us but others may be asking what does living with such biblical optimism look like? I have been thinking about this for much of the week and I want to make three suggestions.

Prayer

The first area is prayer. In one sense optimism undergirds any biblical understanding of prayer, the idea that God would respond to our prayers, and work for our good, which is usually what our prayers are about.

But are we optimistic? Often our prayers can be occasioned by something bad happening, and our prayers may be fatalistic at best.

There is a wonderful example in this story of the way that God is able to answer prayer beyond what we may expect in the story.

When the brothers along with Benjamin went back down to Egypt he said to them "... may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved." (Genesis 43:14). It was a prayer of sorts, a reasonably pessimistic prayer we can note, but it was answered in a way he never expected, he did get the other brother back, but another brother as well, Simeon and Joseph. God almighty mightily answered that prayer.

May the sovereign Lord do so for us as well

I am often embarrassedly surprised when God has answered my prayers, I need to be more regularly optimistic in prayer.

Relationships

Secondly the Joseph story suggests that we should be more optimistic in our relationships.

In the story we see people change, Joseph loses his arrogance, Judah recognises his sin, Jacob is raised from his despondency. All of this is somewhat surprising. But they are wonderful surprises. (recent examples?)

Our relationships can be painful it is not wrong to be optimistic, and again God can surprise us. Reunion and reconciliation are part of God's purposes. We may also find that if we start to view and act optimistically in our relationships that we may be the source of God surprising others.

God of Blessing

Lastly the idea of blessing. If biblical optimism is based on the idea that God's purposes are to bring blessing then we should be people who long to bless others.

For such optimism is not about waiting around for God to do good things, like establishing his kingdom. Rather we should optimistically seek to play our part in being part of God's purpose of blessing. Even small acts of blessing and grace will play their part: each smile, gift, support of the local community. (We as Christians should always be ready to buy a round!)

God achieved his purposes through Joseph's faithfulness, through his wisdom and through his willingness to forgive. We can be confident, have optimism that God, the God who is in charge, can use what we can do, even if it doesn't seem like much, for his purposes of salvation and reconciliation and his glory.

May God bless us as we face the future with optimism and may he use us to bring about his kingdom.