

Minister's Message – November 2013

To Forgive or Not to Forgive

Have you seen one of those children's books where you choose how the story proceeds? Well, let us see how the story of Joseph in the Bible might proceed if we get to decide how.

'Joseph was young, the favourite son of his father. His father made him a fancy coat which he loved to wear. Joseph had ten older brothers who hated father's pet. They hated him even more when he was silly enough to tell them about his dreams. One day they got their chance to teach him a lesson. They ended up selling their brother to some slave traders who took him to Egypt.'

Joseph became a house slave. He hated his brothers for what they did to him. He told himself he would get even with them one day. After two years in prison, for something he did not do, he was bent on getting revenge on his brothers. When things changed for the better he stopped worrying about his evil brothers for a while.

After seven years in a good job, one day he saw his brothers. He remembered how they had treated him some twenty years earlier. Here was his opportunity to get even. What would he do to them? He would make them pay dearly for what they did to him. He slammed them all in prison and arranged for their public execution.'

Millions of people (maybe you are one of them) would see nothing wrong with the story ending in this way. Joseph's brothers expected it to end this way. They feared Joseph was out for revenge. Revenge is our natural response when someone hurts us or criticises us. Stories of revenge fill the media. Revenge that is carefully calculated and exquisitely executed brings satisfaction. I read of a woman who boasted that her ex-husband had to sell his car because of a putrid smell he could not get rid of. She had put prawns in his hubcaps.

Revenge was the way of the world in Joseph's day, as it is today. But revenge did not rule Joseph's life, and it does not have to rule yours. The story in the Bible does not end the way I selected. Joseph looked to God (Genesis 50:19, 20). He committed his ways to the Lord – all his ways and all his relationships. Sometimes even good people keep a secret revenge tucked away.

After their father died his brothers still feared revenge from Joseph. They made up a story about their father's dying words. But Joseph was not bent of revenge. He was not God. It is God's place to take revenge not ours. God repays evil – in this world or the next. For evils like murder he has appointed the state to punish the evil doer, not the individual. God was with Joseph and he looked to God. Instead of making himself miserable with thoughts of revenge he looked out for his fellow prisoners (Genesis 40:6).

If you are bearing a grudge, unable to forgive someone and bent on revenge, you will be miserable. If, on the other hand, you look to the Lord and forgive, as Jesus commands you (Matthew 6:14-15), you will have peace in your heart. If you know the least of how much God has forgiven you, you will be ready to forgive others – he gives his Spirit to help and comfort those who believe.

The apostle Paul urged two women in the church at Philippi to stop bickering and be of one mind. He did not go into the matter of who was to blame. In the light of what Jesus did on the cross and his imminent return, they should be rejoicing in the Lord, not plotting revenge. May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding guard your heart and mind through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).