

Sermon: 'Soaring or stooping?'

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LESSONS: Genesis 41:1-16; 25-37 and 1 Corinthians 4:8-13

Someone once said,

'Solve the world's problems before you turn twenty - while you still know everything.'

There's a natural and understandable arrogance in youth, isn't there?

I thank God for those who were so gracious with me when I was a teenager!

When you're that age, you think your parents are daft, out of touch, and an embarrassment.

The American writer Mark Twain once said,

'When I was a boy of fourteen my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have him around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.'

Our Genesis reading was about Joseph, the young man from Canaan who had 10 older brothers and one younger.

Because he was born when his father, Jacob, was getting on, Joseph spent more time with him than his siblings.

So Joseph and his father became very close.

When Joseph was 17, Jacob gave him the infamous '**coat of many colours**'.

His older brothers became very jealous of their father's deep love for Joseph.

It didn't help matters that Joseph naively told his brothers that he had dreamt he'd have power over them one day and they would bow down to him.

They became angry and envious and wanted to kill him.

Poor Joseph was simply communicating God's revelation to him, but he didn't have the **wisdom** to know what to do with this **knowledge**.

He had little self-awareness of his arrogance and insensitivity; he certainly yet hadn't learnt the art of diplomacy with humility; and God didn't get a mention at all! He had much to learn.

The English poet William Wordsworth said, **'Wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop than when we soar.'**

Godly wisdom isn't manifest in Joseph's life until after he was literally brought low: when he was thrown into a pit by his brothers, then sold into slavery in Egypt, and falsely imprisoned.

It's after these humiliating times that Joseph recognised his limitations, drew close to God, and got his priorities right.

And so we arrive at our reading from Genesis 41.

When Pharaoh can't find anyone to interpret his dreams, he is told that Joseph, the Israelite slave, might be able to help.

Verse 16 is important:

'Joseph answered Pharaoh, 'It is NOT I; GOD will give Pharaoh a favourable answer.'

In lowly humility he emerges to confound Egypt's wisdom, pointing beyond himself to God – the source of his knowledge and insight.

Notice how God's raw material had matured from his teenage years.

This spiritual growth came through adversity, as Joseph learnt that God was with him and was the source of true wisdom.

We learn that Pharaoh's dreams were about the seven years of famine that were looming.

Egypt should use the next seven years of plenty to prepare for seven lean years.

A fifth of the grain should to be stored during each of the years of plenty to see Egypt through the forthcoming famine.

Thanks to Joseph, Egypt was well prepared, and so he became influential in Pharaoh's household, and his brothers DID bow to him!

Teenagers are not alone in being arrogant and self-centred at times. We can all be guilty!

However self-assured we may be,
whatever our knowledge or qualifications,
true wisdom comes only as we learn humility and seek our Creator's wisdom.

This means reflecting on life's experiences and asking God to shape and mould us.

Saint Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:25

'For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'

And we heard Paul's bitter irony in 1 Corinthians 4 when teaching Corinthian Christians to live according to scripture.

They must replace human pride, boasting, and self-sufficiency with a **servant heart**.

For us, this means we try to see the world through God's eyes and not our own.

It's responding to life's challenges and opportunities as God inspires – which may be at odds with worldly wisdom.

Rather than being puffed up, it's about stooping in humility.

Paul points out that Christ embodies this humility.

Philippians, chapter 2:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Paul then says that God exalted our Lord's humble obedience.

Just as Joseph's brothers bowed before him, one day every knee will bow before Jesus, confessing that he IS Christ the Lord!

Friends, could it be that as we face budget cuts and economic uncertainty, we should be humbled as a nation and as individuals?

Could it be that we've failed to be good stewards in times of plenty and been found wanting in the lean times?

Could it be an over-confident society has lived independently from God during the good times, overly relying on economic wealth, and tending towards greed and self-centered arrogance?

As a radio presenter and interviewer, I observe how easy it is for people to apportion blame in the direction of the bankers, politicians, or whoever.

People naturally can ask why we weren't prepared for an international economic crisis, nor protected, nor sufficiently provided for; but anger and pointing the finger isn't the answer.

And perhaps if we take a good look at ourselves, in some way we're all to blame!

Whatever the reasons for these humbling and uncertain days, I believe we should fervently pray for God's help and guidance.

Time and time again, we've seen that Christian communities globally have grown in times of difficulty or persecution.

Perhaps this could be a time of spiritual growth, as we're humbled and have to consider the true value of things, people, and community.

I'm sure there's something to learn from Christian sisters and brothers from around the world – many of whom have graciously coped with a hardship that is greater than we will ever know or experience?

Let's be good stewards of what's been entrusted to us, seeking God's wisdom as we prepare for the future; endeavoring to live generously; loving our neighbours, including the strangers in our midst: people who are marginalized because they're homeless, seeking asylum, or finding life a struggle for other reasons.

I believe the Holy Spirit can transform lives, communities, and nations.

BUT will you stoop and put your faith in the One who raised Jesus, conquering sin and death?

The next time you feel like complaining about the way things are, I encourage you to pray instead – see how God can make a difference through you!

What will you do with the knowledge that God has revealed to you by his grace?

Mark Twain was astonished how much his father had learned in seven years.

May we be astonished by how much we've learnt from our Heavenly Father in the coming years!

A Prayer:

**God, give us grace to accept with serenity □ the things that cannot be changed, □
courage to change the things □ which should be changed, □
and the wisdom to distinguish □ the one from the other. Amen.**

The 'Serenity Prayer' from Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

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