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Dreaming dreams

Bible Reading: Genesis 40

Some time later the king of Egypt's wine steward and his chief baker offended the king. He was angry with these two officials and put them in prison in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same place where Joseph was being kept. They spent a long time in prison, and the captain assigned Joseph as their servant.

One night there in prison the wine steward and the chief baker each had a dream, and the dreams had different meanings. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were upset. He asked them, 'Why do you look so worried today?' They answered, 'Each of us had a dream, and there is no one here to explain what the dreams mean.' 'It is God who gives the ability to interpret dreams,' Joseph said. 'Tell me your dreams.'

So the wine steward said, 'In my dream there was a grapevine in front of me with three branches on it. As soon as the leaves came out, the blossoms appeared, and the grapes ripened. I was holding the king's cup; so I took the grapes and squeezed them into the cup and gave it to him.' Joseph said, 'This is what it means: the three branches are three days. In three days, the king will release you, pardon you, and restore you to your position. You will give him his cup as you did before when you were his wine steward. But please remember me when everything is going well for you, and please be kind enough to mention me to the king and help me get out of this prison. After all, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here in Egypt I didn't do anything to deserve being put in prison.'

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation of the wine steward's dream was favourable, he said to Joseph, 'I had a dream too; I was carrying three breadbaskets on my head. In the top basket there were all kinds of baked goods for the king, and the birds were eating them.' Joseph answered, 'This is what it means: the three baskets are three days. In three days, the king will release you—and have your head cut off! Then he will hang your body on a pole, and the birds will eat your flesh.'

On his birthday three days later, the king gave a banquet for all his officials; he released his wine steward and his chief baker and brought them before his officials. He restored the wine steward to his former position, but he executed the chief baker. It all happened just as Joseph had said. But the wine steward never gave Joseph another thought—he forgot all about him.

Reflection

Doesn't life seem unfair at times? Most of us will know families going through real difficulties through no fault of their own: bereavement, mental and physical health issues, anxiety about finances if jobs are lost, postponement or cancellation (again) of major life

events such as weddings, youngsters about to set off in life full of hope and having it all snatched away. It would be easy to fall into despair, but although we can't always change our circumstances, we can think again about our attitudes and responses.

The lectionary has been taking us through the ups and downs of Joseph's life, and when we meet him today he has already been in prison in Egypt for some time on a trumped-up charge. Even in this situation, despite the unfairness and injustice of his confinement, he knows God's presence. His attitude and obvious capability led to him being given responsibility for others, and it would have been something of an honour to be in charge of the care of these two important court officials. Instead of bemoaning his own condition (although he does refer to it when appropriate), he notices the anxiety of the baker and wine steward and is concerned enough about their well-being to enquire what the problem is and to listen to their stories.

Dreams had major significance in Egyptian culture of the time as messages from gods or demons. The two strange dreams really troubled the officials at a time when they had no access to the usual court interpreters. Imagine their surprise when Joseph claimed that God gave him the ability to interpret and was able to tell them the meaning of their dreams. We understand dreams differently today, but God can still speak to us directly through both dreams and the working of our sub-consciousness. And we also speak of our 'dreams' or hopes for a better world as we think about rebuilding after current crises. What will that better world look like and where can we influence attitudes and policy in a positive direction, so that the future is more closely aligned to God's priorities?

One further reflection from the reading: the chief steward forgot about his experience in prison for two years. What must that time have felt like for Joseph? But in God's timing, it meant that he was in the right position when Pharaoh too had a problem with his dreams. We need to hold onto and remember what we are learning at this time. It is all too easy to hold onto God in the difficulties and depths, but then to forget our dependence on him when things return to 'normal.' The Bible is full of calls to remember: remember God's goodness, remember how he led you, remember what you were, and what you are now in his grace.

Prayer

On 9 August, the Church of England lectionary remembered Mary Sumner, who founded the Mothers' Union in 1876 to share Christ's love through a support network for families.

She wrote this prayer for members and used it herself every day:

All this day, O Lord, let me touch as many lives as possible for thee;
and every life I touch, do thou by thy Spirit quicken,
whether through the word I speak,
the prayer I breathe, or the life I live. Amen

Response

Reflect prayerfully on your dream for a better world. Do one thing today to bring this nearer, and think of something else you can do before the end of this month. It could be as simple as signing a petition or making a donation, writing a letter or making a phone call; it is easy to overlook the value of small actions and gifts, but mustard seeds grow, and loaves and fish are multiplied in God's hands!

You could also...

- Listen to someone else's dream to encourage them.
- If you know someone who is confined and constrained by the circumstances they are in, pray for them now. Can you also identify something positive they could do to help someone else?
- Remember. If you have time, look at the Psalm set for today (Ps 28) which reminds us that 'The Lord gives me help and makes me glad ...'

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