

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
Grace in the Pit, Christ in the Storm
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33

Ever since God promised Abraham land and descendants, one obstacle after another has threatened that promise. Joseph's story brings another obstacle. At first, however, it looks like one more chapter in the life of a deeply troubled family.

At the heart of the story is a painful triangle: seventeen-year-old Joseph, his father Jacob – now also called Israel – and his brothers. Joseph is the son of Rachel, Jacob's great love. Jacob had worked fourteen years to marry her, and she later died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. We're told that Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other children because he was the son of his old age. Favouritism runs through this family's story, and it always brings trouble.

Jacob himself had been his mother's favourite. Together they deceived his elder brother and stole his birthright and blessing. Now Jacob dotes on Joseph, the son who seems to embody God's promise. He gives him a special robe with long sleeves – the garment once translated as 'a coat of many colours'. Perhaps its long sleeves suggested that Joseph was not expected to do manual work. Whatever its meaning, the gift did nothing to bring harmony to the family.

Then there are Joseph's eleven brothers. They are deeply hurt by their father's obvious favouritism. Hurt becomes jealousy, and jealousy becomes hatred. Events left out of today's reading make matters worse. Joseph is a dreamer, and dreams will shape his life. He has two dreams whose meaning is clear: one day his family will bow down to him. Perhaps he is simply naïve; perhaps he is self-centred; perhaps he is both. In any case, he tells his brothers, and they hate him for both the dreams and his constant talk about them. Even Jacob rebukes him. Yet neither Joseph nor Jacob seems to grasp how deep the brothers' jealousy has become. Jacob sends Joseph to check on them as they pasture the flocks, and Joseph goes wearing the robe that displays his father's favour.

The brothers plan to kill Joseph, but Reuben, the eldest, talks them out of it. Instead, they strip off his robe and throw him into an empty well. Joseph may not be an appealing character, but his brothers are now shown to be callous and cruel. After throwing him into the pit, they sit down to eat. They show no compassion and no remorse. They believe they have dealt with the dreamer: 'We shall see what will become of his dreams.'

Joseph's fall into the pit is the first of several descents and ascents. Pulled from the pit, he's taken down to Egypt and sold as a slave. Yet God blesses him, and he rises to authority in Potiphar's household. Falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, he falls again – this time into prison. Once more God blesses him, and once more he's given responsibility. After Joseph interprets the chief cupbearer's dream, he's again forgotten, and he seems destined to remain in prison. Then the cupbearer remembers. Joseph is lifted from the prison 'pit' and raised to the highest position possible: second in command over Egypt. It is a pattern we may recognise – rising and falling, descending and ascending. Through it all, often unseen, God is at work. Joseph's authority in Egypt will save his family, and in time they will bow before him.

This disturbing story of violence, betrayal, selfishness and foolishness becomes the means by which Israel's descendants survive a terrible famine. A sense of God's purpose runs through it all. At the end of the story Joseph says to his brothers, 'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.'

The story makes me wonder about God's presence in our lives. Where is God amid both the good and the bad? What can God make of the messes we create, of our selfishness, foolishness and heartache? The narrator believes that God is somehow present in every circumstance. In spite of our failures, God's purposes are still at work, often quietly and unseen.

It's easy to despair of humanity. What use can God make of people as flawed as we are? Yet Joseph's story shows that God can draw good even from sin and failure. That doesn't mean calling evil good. In a family as troubled as Jacob's, harmful behaviour must be challenged, and injustice must not be ignored. Still, Joseph comes to recognise God's goodness at work amid the evil he suffered. His story invites us to look for God's presence in the difficult places of our own lives.

The Gospel asks the same question as Jesus walks towards the disciples across the sea. For the ancient world, the sea represented chaos and danger. Jesus comes across that chaos as the one who has power over it. Peter doubts, and Jesus asks why he has so little faith. This isn't a condemnation of doubt. Rather, it's a reminder that faith means being open to God's presence in the turbulence of life. Jesus' arrival doesn't end the storm at once; that comes later. Our experience is often the same. God's presence doesn't always bring immediate calm, but the chaos begins to lose its grip, and within it we may discover new meaning and transformation.

Peter, like Joseph – and perhaps like us – faces circumstances that seem overwhelming. We live with the consequences of our own failures and the failures of others. We live in a world scarred by selfishness and suffering, and we may ask: Where is God? What is God doing?

We aren't puppets, and God isn't a puppeteer. God is more like a sculptor who can make something beautiful from what is broken. For the great artist, nothing is too bent to be used – not tragedy, not bad decisions, not even ordinary human meanness. Joseph becomes a living work of art, and so do we. Even through us, God is weaving the divine purpose.

Loving God,
be with us in the pits and storms of life.
Help us to trust your presence,
follow Christ with courage,
and believe that you can bring hope and new life
from what is broken. Amen.

*Alister Hendery
Taradale – 9.8.2026*