

That sinking feeling

I don't know whether you have ever experienced something where your anxiety is so bad that your stomach feels very unsettled. Sometimes that feeling is referred to as butterflies in the stomach but I think it feels a little more like sinking.

The two stories we have in the scriptures today give us glimpses of what it was like for 2 key characters in the Bible. The first one was Joseph and the second was Peter. For very different reasons they are key people we need to understand because of the roles they played in the history of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, although Islam has some slightly different ways of seeing Joseph.

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at the stories of some other key people in the Old Testament. We have heard of Abraham and Sarah including that of the son of Abraham's concubine Hagar and her son Ishmael. In that story Ishmael was rejected and sent away. We don't hear much of what happened to him but in today's story, many, many years later it is his descendants who come in a caravan and to whom Joseph is sold as a slave.

Then we heard of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, who in his old age becomes a father to Esau and Jacob. Jacob means deceiver, and he tricks Esau out of his birthright. In time Jacob goes to Laban and is tricked by Laban and works 14 years to end up marrying the one sister he loved, but on his return to the family, he wrestles with someone, perhaps we can think of this someone as God, and is given a new name- the name of Israel. We think that maybe the name Jacob which means deceiver has gone but it is still hanging in there.

Today the Genesis passage begins with Jacob still being called Jacob- then it slips into his new name of Israel. He is back in his country, the promised land, with his 2 wives, 2 concubines and 12 sons and a daughter. Most of his sons are born to the concubines, because Rachel his wife had been unable to have children for a long time- just like Rebecca and Sarah before her. So Jacob was an old man before Joseph was born- and the bible tells us that Joseph was his favourite. His brothers were jealous- understandably. Family dynamics are at play here- and there is little surprise when Joseph goes on a message for his father that the brothers throw him into a well.



Thankfully, Reuben speaks up and Joseph is not killed. And when the descendants of Ishmael come along from a place called Midian, they sell Joseph to them. What the bible doesn't tell us today is that the brothers return home and trick Jacob now Israel by telling him that Joseph is dead. Jacob the deceiver has once again been deceived. Interestingly the brother who suggested Joseph be sold was Judah- and for countless centuries there was division between the nations of Israel and Judah- perhaps a sign of how family dynamics can impact on many generations later.

So Joseph, the preferred and spoiled son was thrown into a well, then sold into slavery at 17 years of age. What a dark place he must have been in.

By contrast, Peter was not thrown into a dark place but found himself in a unique place. He, along with the other disciples, was on a boat in the middle of the lake in the middle of a storm and these seasoned fishermen were frightened. In the middle of this storm, in the strangest of places, Jesus comes walking on the water. He had been left on the shore, taken himself off to pray, and now he appeared before them in a way which cannot be explained. Peter, full of courage one moment and full of doubt in another, challenges Jesus. "if it is you then call me out of the boat". So Peter is called out of the boat and begins to walk on water. While ever he kept his eyes on Jesus he was

fine but as soon as he began to think on the reality around him he began to sink. And I can only imagine that sinking into the sea in the midst of a storm would have been rather frightening.



Many years ago it is this story of Peter which helped me when I was in a life and death situation and would often feel myself sinking. In hospital, bleeding during pregnancy with a young son at home, I was only minutes from death on several occasions. Whenever I thought about the risks and the challenges of what was happening to me I was so overwhelmed and frightened. I was ready to die from a faith perspective, but I did not want to leave my husband and son, nor lose the little one I was carrying. So I would fix my eyes on Jesus and his amazing peace would flood over me and help me be at peace.

I know that sinking feeling and how easy it is to feel overwhelmed and wonder what the next minutes or hours or days will bring. I think most of us have had similar experiences for different reasons, and that sinking feeling requires great faith to overcome.

Yet we know that Joseph did not remain in a pit, nor even when he arrived in Egypt and ended in a gaol, he did not remain there. He knew that God was with him. His name means multiplier- and his story which we hear more of over the coming weeks showed the presence of God with him. Eventually he was able to forgive his brothers and be reunited with his father.

We also know that Peter did believe yet in his belief there were times when he doubted. Peter is perhaps the one we can connect with in our own faith. 'I believe, please forgive my unbelief' are the words of a father bringing his child for healing to Jesus. They are words which I think can connect to all of us.

So in this time of Covid, when we see and hear of explosions in Beirut, and other natural disasters happening in other parts of the world, when there may seem to be little hope, the message from the scriptures is one of hope.

My prayer for you this week is that you may fix your eyes on Jesus, so that what seems too much to bear, is born by the one who came to earth to save us. May you feel the peace of Jesus deep within your spirits as you experience the faithfulness of God.