



The Empty Cistern of Our Pain



"And he said mildly to them: Come nearer to me. And when they were come near him, he said: I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Be not afraid, and let it not seem to you a hard case that you sold me into these countries: for God sent me before you into Egypt for your preservation. ... Not by your counsel was I sent hither, but by the will of God." (Genesis 45.4-5+8)

The Patriarch Joseph comes to us as a paradigm of faith, mercy, and justice.

Joseph was loved by Jacob. He was the son of his old age and Jacob doted upon him to the growing resentment and jealousy of his brothers. What is more, Joseph was "a dreamer", whereas his brothers were ... practical. The world has little use for dreamers, but God is sometimes the giver of dreams.

Predilection – favor by God or parent – is so often the occasion of resentment. We feel somehow "less" and desire the place of favor, honor, notability. Why God's predilection for Joseph? Why not Levi? Simeon? Asher?

Having been sold into slavery by his brothers – and only after Ruben and Judah had pleaded for his life as his brothers threw Joseph into a dry cistern in the desert to die – Joseph had reason, just cause, to seek revenge, to redress the injustice done him. Egypt was ever in need of slaves, and under the good auspices of Pharaoh, Joseph was in charge of Egypt ...

Gaunt, scourged by famine and burned by the fierce Egyptian sun, the brothers came to Joseph seeking the kindness from an apparent stranger that they had failed to accord their own brother. Most readers can identify with Joseph in one way or another, for we have all known injustice, cruelty, indifference. We await the denouement that will slake our thirst for revenge, and savor the irony. "*Joseph will teach them a lesson they will never forget!*"

And Joseph does.

He falls upon their shoulders in tears ... *and forgives them.*

Why?

Joseph was more merciful than just, and bitterness had never taken hold of his heart. What is more, Joseph's mercy was equaled, even exceeded, by his wisdom, for he tells his astonished brothers what each of us should tell ourselves in times of adversity ... even extremity:

"Not by your counsel was I sent hither, but by the will of God."

Where you are now ... that pit of despondency, that crucible of pain is not of your choosing, and if, by another, you find yourself there, do not be deceived. You did not choose it. Another did not force it upon you (although by all appearances – much like dry cisterns – it would appear to be). You are where you are for a purpose beyond your immediate understanding. It seems impossible to redeem, and no good can come of it for all that you can see – and what of those who threw you into the cistern, who left you to die, who turned away indifferent to your pain, your fate? Do you think that God will not use your suffering, and even their malice, to an end unspeakably good and known to Him alone?

In your pain do not imprecate those who have brought it to you. Joseph had every reason to, but did not. Joseph lived to see this act of faith fulfilled. Another died in its fulfillment ... and like Joseph who prefigured Him, he, too, replied to the presumption and the hubris of his tormentor who foolishly thought himself the final arbiter pursuing his own selfish ends:

"Non haberes potestatem adversum me ullam, nisi tibi datum esset desuper." "You have no power over me, except it were given you from above." (St. John 19.11)

Understand this. There is redemption in your suffering, but it will not be on your terms. A far greater good lies before you than the paltry immediacy of the lesser good that you would choose.

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