

One of the things that the readings for Lent present to us is what happened to Joseph, son of Jacob/Israel. For the sake of clarity, this is *not* Joseph the foster father of Jesus; it is a/the Joseph in the Old Testament.

First, a little more on who this Joseph is. Remember that the way Revelation and the faith got started (directly) was with Abraham – called “our father in faith.” God promised Abraham that He would make of him a great nation. Abraham then had a son named Isaac who, in turn, had a son named Jacob; so Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. Jacob was renamed Israel by God. Jacob/Israel had 12 sons, which then gave rise to the 12 tribes of Israel (Jacob) – the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham; each of Jacob’s 12 sons married and had children, who then also married and had children, and so on. Thus, all of the Israelites trace(d) back to one the 12 sons of Israel – hence the 12 tribes of Israel, comprising the nation of Israel.

One of the 12 sons of Israel was named Joseph. This is who this article is talking about. Joseph, as Scripture (Book of Genesis) says, was among the youngest of Israel’s sons and he had become the favorite of their father. Israel had made him a special garment to wear – a long tunic of many colors as Scripture puts it – reflecting his special affection for Joseph. The fact that he was the favorite already provoked his brothers. But it went further. Joseph also told them about a dream he had; he and his brothers were harvesting wheat, gathering the wheat into bundles, each with his own bundle; then all of the other bundles came and paid homage to his bundle. Of course, this just steamed them all the more. Well one day, while his brothers were out tending the sheep, Israel told Joseph to go out with his brothers. They saw him as he approached and, out of their blind hatred for him, they plotted to kill him. However, one of the brothers (Reuben) didn’t like that at all and wanted to rescue him and return him to their father. So Reuben said: we shouldn’t kill him, he is our father’s son after all; let’s just throw him in that dry cistern over there, that way we won’t be killing him directly. Reuben planned to later come back and rescue him. They all agreed and so they threw him the cistern.

But then, as they sat down to eat, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming, who were bound for Egypt (Ishmaelites were descendants of Ishmael, a son of Abraham from Hagar, i.e., not Sarah; so the Ishmaelites were, in a sense, distant cousins of the Israelites). Then Judah – one of the sons of Israel – said, let’s sell him to these Ishmaelites, which they did. He was sold for 20 pieces of silver, taken to Egypt, and sold there as a slave to one of Pharaoh’s officials. Joseph thus ended up serving, let us say for brevity, in Pharaoh’s government, although still as a Hebrew slave. Now it had become known to one of Pharaoh’s officials that Joseph could interpret dreams and one night Pharaoh had a disturbing dream. He did not know what it meant so Joseph was brought to Pharaoh to interpret it. Joseph told him that his dream meant that there would be 7 good years, followed by 7 years of famine. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of preparing for the 7 years of famine, which he did with great diligence. When the famine came, Egypt was well prepared. Joseph had done such a good job preparing for the famine that Pharaoh put him in charge of distributing the food that had been stored up.

Now the famine also affected Israel and his family. So Israel instructed his sons to go to Egypt to buy food. And who did they have to go to in order to buy food? Of course it was their own brother, Joseph. Now Joseph was young when his brothers had sold him and he was much older now so they did not recognize him when they came before him. But Joseph recognized them immediately. He did not, however, reveal himself to them right away. After a considerable amount of go-around, though, Joseph told them who he was and there was forgiveness, reconciliation, and a very happy reunion of his whole family. Israel moved his whole family to Egypt and the Israelites lived there, flourishing, for centuries.

Overall, then, what happened with Joseph, son of Israel? He was betrayed by his own brothers who hated him because of their father’s favor, betrayed by his own people, sold for 20 pieces of silver, and then became the savior of the very brothers who had betrayed him, resulting in forgiveness, reconciliation, and the happiness of reunion. Joseph was a prefigurement of our Lord. This concrete, tangible historical event helps us to understand what happened with our Lord and what He did. Let us bring out the parallels explicitly...

Jesus came to His own people, sent by His Father. Instead of being grateful, his own brothers ground their teeth at Him. They hated and rejected Him, in part because He was the favorite of the Father, a position they wanted

for themselves. So they plotted and schemed against Him, seeking to kill Him – just like Joseph’s brothers did. He was sold for 30 pieces of silver, fetching just a little higher price than Joseph. In the end, Jesus became the Savior of the very ones who betrayed Him. But let us continue so as to see mainly as it relates to Lent.

Part of this event with Joseph and his brothers I left out for the sake of brevity; it would be good and helpful to read the whole account, which begins in Chapter 37 of Genesis. To really see the main point of all of this, though, the climax of this event in Israel history and how it now applies to us and the season of Lent, there is one more point that has touched upon briefly. Joseph’s brothers, before they knew who he was, were brought low by hard circumstances – not just their shortage of food but also because of conditions that Joseph placed on them to get any food. Once these hard conditions happened, it brought to their minds the grievous wrong they had committed *and*...they acknowledged that wrong and were deeply sorry; they said this is happening because of what we did, acknowledging not only their guilt but that they deserved what was happening. They spoke about this amongst themselves in front of Joseph, but they spoke in Hebrew not realizing that Joseph could understand them. This moved Joseph very much interiorly; he wept at their contrition and could no longer restrain himself from revealing to them who he was and granting them forgiveness. It was then, after hearing their sincere contrition, sorrow, and regret that the great, very happy reunion and reconciliation occurred.

This is the supreme point. It is exactly what our Lord does with us, it is the point of Lent, what Lent especially draws our attention to, it is what our Lord wants to teach us with this event in Israel’s history and why it is presented to us during Lent. What happened to Joseph happened, and continues to happen, to our Lord. Each of us has done to our Lord what Joseph’s brothers did to him. Every sin is a choice to throw our Lord in the cistern, cast Him aside, sell Him off. Every sin saddens the heart of Jesus, just as Joseph’s brothers did with their betrayal. Like Joseph, though, He deeply desires to be reunited; He has no interest in retribution. Notice, though, that reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers did not occur, *could* not occur, until they were deeply sorry for what they had done. But once that sorrow was there and they expressed it, Joseph could not even restrain himself – he practically threw himself at his brothers in an embrace of reconciliation, which resulted in great happiness. So it was with Joseph, so it is with our Lord; so it was with Joseph’s brothers, so it is for us; recognizing, acknowledging, and being sorry for our sin is a necessary part of joyous reconciliation.

Another reading for weekday Mass during Lent is that of Naaman the Aramean. Naaman was a Gentile, not a Jew, and he was highly regarded in the king’s army. However, he had leprosy. A Jewish girl told him that there was a prophet in Israel (Elisha) who could heal him so he went to Israel, taking with him exorbitant gifts to give to the one who healed him. First he went to the king of Israel but the king sent him (eventually) to Elisha. Elisha did not even come out to see him when he arrived, but sent someone out to tell him to go to the Jordan and wash 7 times. Naaman was angered, saying that he thought the prophet would at least come out and see him and wave his hand over his leprosy and he decided to just leave. But those who were with him talked him into doing what Elisha had told him to do, which he then did. Of course he was completely healed and very grateful for it. He went back to thank Elisha and offer him the magnificent gifts which he had brought.

Remember that whenever God does a physical healing, it is, in addition to being a physical healing, also a sign of the greater spiritual healing, a healing of the soul, that He ultimately wants to bring about. The healing of leprosy is especially a sign of the healing of the leprosy of the soul that our Lord wants to do. So notice overall what happened with Naaman. First of all, a great desire to be healed; he will lower himself to go to Israel to be healed; the lavish gifts he brings are also a sign of his desire. To receive healing of the soul, we have to see its value and really desire it. Naaman has to search around to get this healing – first he goes to the wrong place (the king) but then eventually makes it to Elisha; this great officer of the king’s army is open to instruction. Now when he comes to Elisha he has certain expectations of how things should go – he still has some pride. He would have completely lost out on his healing if his companions had not said to him: just do what the man told you to do. If we are to receive mercy from the Lord, we have to listen to that council as well – just do what the Man told you to do. Don’t place judgement on it; don’t decide for yourself what He should or shouldn’t do, or how He should do it; don’t evaluate it or demand explanation, just do what the Man told you to do. Be sorry and go to Confession, otherwise there is no exultant, joyful healing.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*