

Hurt at Church Testimony: Vulnerability through Joseph's eyes

What follows is one person's perspective on a deeply painful situation at church. We are sharing stories such as these because we think it is important to hear the voices of those who have been through these experiences. We are sharing stories like these because we hope, and pray, they will fuel corporate, Christ-centred, lament. And we are sharing stories like these as an aid to personal reflection – something to help us all grow in our understanding of how we tend to respond when situations like this arise. As you read, please resist the temptation to try to identify who the author and church are – these stories have been specifically chosen because they resonate with a range of contexts. As you read, please do ask yourself questions like: What are my initial thoughts? What emotions is this raising? Who am I most likely to believe? What am I most likely to be blind to? What questions would I want to ask? How could I helpfully pray for and love people in situations like this?

Starting ministry as the minister of a small church in a deprived area, I really did not expect to be hurt by the church or for me to hurt others. Writing that sentence highlights, to me, how naive I was. Looking back, I can now see ways the Lord was working in and through my naivety and great pain. Entering into any situation or relationship involves risk. We make ourselves vulnerable to the sins of others and they become vulnerable to our sins. I've since learned to view vulnerability through Joseph's eyes.

Five good years in situ were followed by five more years dominated by increasing conflict which resulted in me working harder with decreasing personal capacity for ministry. When I sought support from the regional support structures it made life worse. Every involvement by regional staff added injury to injury. A repetitive cycle of mishandled complaints, bungled processes, punitive meetings and unjust decisions poured fuel on the fire. Repeated failure to address the source of our conflict, stop the wounding or begin some healing caused me and others deep trauma.

By the end of that time I was unfit for work. I was emotionally unable to enter the church buildings without deep anxiety and trembling. I cried to God in a staff meeting for him to close the church for 40 days and 40 nights. We needed to reset, take back the keys and start everything from scratch. Two months later, following a biopsy and an extremely punitive three-hour interrogation by a senior minister, I was signed off work by my doctor due to post-traumatic stress and I couldn't see a way back. My bags were packed.

But the Lord was not finished. Wonderfully, having been brought to the end of myself, the Covid lockdowns, which were to me a direct and gracious answer to prayer, created a space for healing and recovery. Recovery began by my exploring resources for counselling PTSD sufferers. I listened to podcasts from the Institute for Biblical

Counselling and Discipleship (ibcd.org). I can only remember one lesson. I learned to renarrate what had happened through the biblical narrative- in other words to tell the story again. Renarration avoids one of two mistakes trauma sufferers make. We either try to shut the memories away, squash them down, suppress their ability to hurt, or we aimlessly retell the story, which is akin to stabbing ourselves repeatedly in the same place we are already bleeding. I needed to tell the story within a biblical narrative framework. I had been teaching on the life of Joseph so I started there.

I knew that what had happened was evil. I knew it had happened for some kind of good, for my own sanctification, for my family's good, somehow, though I still can't see how, and the good of the church as a whole. I could look back and say with Joseph 'what others meant for evil, God meant for good, to bring about the salvation of many.' But I also found myself building layer upon layer of renarration. One of the most important aspects of that storytelling was seen through the lens of Joseph's vulnerability.

I had convinced myself that suffering was inevitable. Jesus had called me to pick up my cross and follow him. I told myself that ministry was bound to be painful. I believed I needed to do the right thing and, somehow, God's word and the Holy Spirit would transform people, including me, and the situation would resolve itself. And so, like many people in toxic or abusive situations, I kept putting myself in harm's way. I kept walking back into the situation and being caught in a toxic spiral. I didn't leave.

Joseph experienced four kinds of vulnerability. These have acted as a vital lens, a reorienting story.

Unknowingly Vulnerable

Joseph was unknowingly vulnerable as he went to visit his brothers who were tending the sheep. He did not know that they planned to murder him. He could not know that they would throw him into a pit, abduct him and sell him as a slave. Very often we find ourselves in situations where we are unknowingly vulnerable. I could not know that conflict would arise in the streets around my house and in the church when I first started ministry.

Unchosenly Vulnerable

Joseph was also unchosenly vulnerable. He was a slave in a house where his master's wife had a desire for him from which he could not escape. He did not choose to be a slave. He did not choose his lot. Very often we find ourselves in situations not of our choosing where there seems little or no choice. Staying or leaving a church seems, on the surface, to be a fairly simple choice. In reality, choice is more complex. In the midst of the conflict, I had a strong sense that the good shepherd would stay to protect the sheep whilst the hired hand runs away. I also knew I was a sheep, and I had a Good

Shepherd who would not leave nor forsake me. I believed that leaving this church would only make life more difficult for my successor because those who exercise power in ungodly ways get a shot in the arm by a victory which would then strengthen their resolve in the future. My children were settled in schools, my wife and I had moved house eight times in thirteen years, and we were not ready to move again. I felt I had no choice but to stay in my vulnerable state.

Chosen Invulnerability

Joseph later chose invulnerability when his brothers turned up unannounced. Joseph withdrew to a quiet room where he cried his eyes out, but he kept his defences up. He chose to test his brothers to discover whether or not they were still as evil as they were when they sold him as a slave. I have now found ways I can choose to be invulnerable. Our regional support structure now has a policy for identifying vexatious, malicious and unreasonably persistent complaints. Pastors will be able to shield themselves from the harm caused by mishandled complaints. Prior to the adoption of that policy, I informed my regional support that I will not respond to some complaints. I retain the right not to engage.

Chosen Vulnerability

Joseph chose, in the end, to make himself vulnerable. He had to wait until he had established that his brothers had changed; that they had developed compassion for their father and the willingness to do what was right, including self-sacrifice. Then Joseph dropped his guard. He chose to be vulnerable. He wept on the shoulders of his brothers. We have rebuilt trust in our local church in a number of ways. We have developed staff 360s, which focus on our sense of being chosen by God and called to this place. We then discuss character, community and competencies (The CPAS Five Cs of ministry). We have developed better safeguarding processes and practices now we are more aware of the abuse of power, our vulnerability and how easily we are deceived.

In a fallen world, where we can't know the future, we will always be vulnerable, either unknowingly or unchosenly, but we can choose when not to be vulnerable by the use of proper boundaries and healthy practices. When the church has caused hurt, trust needs to be rebuilt before we need to choose to make ourselves vulnerable again. That process can take years, if it ever happens, especially with those who are not local.

God's Timescales

Joseph was seventeen years old when he was sold as a slave. He was thirty when released from prison. He was at least thirty-nine when his brothers arrived in Egypt for the first time. He was reunited with his grieving father, Jacob, after a separation 23 or 24 years. He could only summarise his life's lesson when he was in his mid-fifties: what his brothers meant for evil, God meant for good, to bring about the salvation of many. The pain of church conflict can drag on for what seems an age. God is not slow in keeping his promises. His timescales are not ours. His thoughts not our thoughts, nor his ways our ways.

Writing this has helped me see the need to keep guards up for now. Trust has not been rebuilt with some people in positions of authority. Those relationships are as distant as Joseph and his brothers when they lived separate lives in Egypt and Cannan. There is always hope of restoration, in God's time and in his ways.