The Cupbearer and the Baker

Did you watch “The Mystery of Al Capone’s Vault”? This was a much-anticipated live broadcast of the opening of Al Capone’s vault in 1986. The hidden vault was inside the Lexington Hotel in Chicago where Capone lived for 3 years. The vault was discovered during a site assessment for a potential renovation of the building. From Wikipedia; “The two-hour special (including commercials) was greatly hyped as potentially revealing great riches or dead bodies on live television. This included the presence of a medical examiner should bodies be found, and agents from the Internal Revenue Service to collect any of Capone's money that might be discovered. When the vault was finally opened, the only things found inside were dirt and several empty bottles, including one Rivera claimed was for moonshine bathtub gin. After several attempts to dig further into the vault, Geraldo admitted defeat and voiced his disappointment to the viewers, apologizing as he thanked the excavation team for their efforts.” The widely panned program illustrated the risks associated with promoting an event with uncertain results. Observing the motto, “under promise, overdeliver” is much more circumspect.

In our study of chapter 40 of Genesis we see Joseph risking his credibility by predicting in public events that would soon occur. The chapter begins with Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker being put in the prison where Joseph was being held. Note that the prison was located in the house of the captain of the guard who was Potiphar. It could be that the prison was located in the basement of Potiphar’s house. While no reason is given for the imprisonment of the 2 men, many speculate that Pharaoh suspected a plot to assassinate him and these men would have access to him. Each of the men had a dream and lamented that there was no one present to interpret their dreams. The interpretation of dreams was practiced by seers in Egypt however there were none present in the prison. Notice Joseph’s rebuke of the use of seers with his statement “Do not interpretations belong to God?” He then asked the men to tell him what they had dreamed. Their dreams were similar with each involving the tools of their trade, wine and bread. After hearing the dream of the cupbearer, Joseph interpreted the dream to mean that the cupbearer would be restored to his position in 3 days. Joseph also asked him to advocate on his behalf to have him released from prison. Encouraged by the positive interpretation of the cupbearer’s dream, the baker told Joseph about his dream. Joseph interpreted the baker’s dream to mean that he would be put to death by Pharaoh. Both of Joseph’s predictions came true; the cupbearer regained his job and the baker was executed. The chapter ends with the cupbearer failing to ask for Joseph’s release.

In last week’s study of chapter 39, we noted that the statement “God was with Joseph” was repeated 4 times (see Deut. 31:6, Josh. 1:5 and Matt. 28:20). Joseph had the ability to interpret dreams not only because God was with him but also because Joseph’s faith never wavered. His relationship with God was such that he was confident that he could interpret the dreams correctly but he also gave God the glory for his spiritual gift of prophecy. His predictions could easily be verified since they would occur in three days. Unlike Nostradamus whose predictions were sufficiently shrouded in generalities to avoid scrutiny, Joseph made 2 very specific predictions which came true in the prescribed time frame. While not as dramatic as Elijah’s calling down fire to consume wet wood and rocks, Joseph nonetheless went out on a limb to prophesy about the dreams. I am amused when modern day financial “prophets” are called upon to make predictions about the economy. The joke about economists is that they have predicted 12 of the last 3 recessions. Even a stopped clock is right twice each day.

Beyond providing the meaning of the dreams, Joseph’s interpretations had another purpose. Since Joseph was a prophet, he spoke the truth while providing both good and bad news to listener. While some might want to sugar coat the bad news, Joseph provided the unvarnished truth. This would be the sort of person needed to advise Pharaoh about the famine to come without fearing to tell the bad with the good. Joseph would provide both the good news of abundant crops and the bad news of the famine. In modern day parlance, he was not afraid to speak truth to power.

There may also be some symbolism in Joseph’s interpretations of the dreams of the cupbearer and baker. Similar to the 2 thieves hung on crosses with Jesus, 1 thief was with Jesus in paradise in 3 days while the other thief died without putting his faith in Jesus. Notice also that baker waited until he saw the favorable interpretation of the cupbearers dream before he told Joseph about his dream. If Joseph had good news for him, he would be interested in what Joseph would have to say. Jesus encountered such people in his ministry who would be fair weather friends (see the cost of following Jesus, Luke 9:57-62 and the rich young man, Mark 10:17-22).

I’ll close with the sage observation of Yogi Berra; “It’s hard to make predictions, especially about the future”.