

SERMON: Sunday – 16 July 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

It takes all sorts of people to build the Church

Genesis 25:21-28

Romans 16:1-7, 12-16

Some are strong
Others are weak
Some have red hair
Others have none
Some are tall
Others are short
Some are hunters
Others stay home
Some are female
Others male
All are different
All are one

Its amazing the number of women Paul mentions at the end of his letter to the Romans. And its amazing how different Esau and Jacob were.

A thread runs through both readings this week, and that is one of gender roles. The western Christian Church has a lot to answer for in maintaining and creating certain modern conceptions of gender norms.

Gender roles might not have changed much but the language we use has changed. For example, when some of us were growing up, at school it was always the headmaster. And the local committee was always chaired by a chairman. Nowadays, few of us would use those terms and head teacher or chair person have become the norm. Firemen are fire fighters and I think the postman is still a postie because post person just doesn't sound right.

But let me go back to that earlier claim that The western Christian Church has a lot to answer for in maintaining and creating certain modern conceptions of gender norms.

The apostle Paul is often used as an example of someone who might advocate for women being excluded from leadership within the Church.

And when people outside of church hear such things then they're rightly annoyed.

That interpretation of Paul's writing is a gross disservice to Paul, and in today's letter to the Romans we hear how he happily commends women and their gifts to the church, in leadership roles and as indispensable leaders in the faith.

And we see this too in the story of Rebekah, with her role given such prominence. In the Genesis account this week, we have jumped forward twenty years into Rebekah and Isaac's marriage, they have not had children at this point, but Isaac wants one. He prays to God and Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins. There is no indication that Rebekah is longing to be a mother, indeed, rather than portray her as being overly thankful for her situation, she questions why she should have to endure such pain. A reminder that not all pregnancies are welcome or happy occasions.

It is Isaac who petitions God, it is Rebekah, however, who speaks to God and receives a reply. This is in itself an unusual occurrence, as the bible rarely describes women receiving this kind of direct conversation with God.

When Esau and Jacob are born, there is a clear divide in their characters, one assuming the perceived normative masculine traits, while Jacob is described as a quiet man "living in tents," tents traditionally being associated more with women than men.

And of course there results an unhealthy discrimination in Rebekah favouring Jacob whilst Isaac favoured Esau.

Both readings this week challenge the view many have of the roles of women and men in the bible.

Paul's letter challenges the idea that the early church leadership was the sole preserve of men. It is clear from this reading that women played a vital role and had recognised positions of authority. Women in leadership is not a modern invention.

However, again some of the language we use within the church when talking in terms of leadership can be exclusively male language and we need to always try to find gender neutral alternatives, like the ones I mentioned earlier, so as to avoid excluding or minimising.

We live in days when some people like to choose to make it clear to others which gender they prefer. For example, I have colleagues who sign their emails or letters with their preferred pronouns. Some use he and his after their name. Some she and hers. Some they and theirs. And I've heard people say how they think that's just unnecessary. And maybe it is. But there

has to be room for all. If someone prefers to be addressed in a particular way then why not.

We might have grown up in a more binary world but that's not always meant we've treated everyone with kindness, respect and tolerance, attitudes that Jesus embodied and wants us to as well. I think when it comes to gender issues we need especially to treat people with love and acceptance irrespective of who they are.

Gender might be a hot political topic in many Western countries at the moment, with many relying on a particular biblical interpretation to justify exclusive and exclusionary positions, but the bible is not so clear as some would have it be when it comes to how people of whatever gender should and do act.

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Paul wasn't a misogynist. His letters, like this one today, make it clear that women in leadership was quite the norm and indeed the early church would not have prospered in the way it did if women had not been equally involved.

For example, Phoebe is mentioned. She was trusted by Paul to deliver his letter to the Romans. Paul refers to her both as a "servant" or "deacon" (Greek diakonos) and as a helper or patron of many (Greek prostatis). This is the only place in the New Testament where a woman is specifically referred to with these two distinctions. Paul introduces Phoebe as his emissary to the church in Rome and, because they are not acquainted with her, Paul provides them with her credentials.

Priscilla was a woman of Jewish heritage and one of the earliest known Christian converts who lived in Rome. Her name is a Roman diminutive for Prisca which was her formal name. She is often thought to have been the first example of a female preacher or teacher in early church history. Coupled with her husband, she was a celebrated missionary, and a friend and co-worker of Paul.

While the view is not widely held among scholars, some scholars have suggested that Priscilla was the author of the Book of Hebrews. Although acclaimed for its artistry, originality, and literary excellence, it is the only book in the New Testament where the author is anonymous.

Scholars have suggested that Priscilla was the author, but that her name was omitted either to suppress its female authorship, or to protect the letter itself from suppression. She is the only Priscilla named in the New Testament and she is always mentioned with her husband, Aquila.

Together with Paul, they were tent makers which is a model to all of us that church leadership can be mediated through one's everyday labour; that even our everyday labour matters in the Kingdom of God, its not just a way to pay the bills or finance the ministry.

Rebekah's story again raises an opportunity for the Church to affirm the variety of God's creation. The multitude of traits and qualities that God's people possess, and the ways in which they have been shown and celebrated throughout our history.

God's people may be one but they are not a homogenous group. The way they act is not dictated by narrow, prescriptive roles. Simply acknowledging this to be true will be good news for those on the margins of our communities.

As we affirm the great variety of God's people, we can celebrate the central role we all play in God's work in the world. God calls us all, warts and all, all sorts of people, so that God can reach all sorts of people with life affirming love.

When Esau and Jacob were born,

The Lord said to Rebekah,
"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger."

We can read this as if it were God's intention that people would be rivals and separated. But is it God's intention that people live as rivals. I don't think so.

In Genesis 26:24 it appears that God's intention is that all peoples live as one nation or one people

I will multiply your descendants, and they will become a great nation.

The rivalry wasn't helped by parental favouritism, Rebekah preferring Jacob and Isaac Esau. We know the damage favouritism can cause in families or among peoples.

There is a lot of rivalry and conflict between nations in our world that it seems an impossible ideal that people might live together as one.

Rivalry and conflict have existed since the beginning.

In Genesis 27:40, Isaac tells Esau that he will live by the sword

You will live by your sword,
and you will serve your brother.
But when you decide to break free,
you will shake his yoke from your neck.

When you decide to break free? So a day would come when the yoke of nationalism and rivalry would be broken? There is hope. Hope then, that nations can live in peace as one. It must be possible, whenever people seek to follow God's ways.

So how can we sum up these ramblings in Genesis and Romans?

We're all different but God intended the variety.
It wasn't an accident.
And though we're all different we're at the same time all one.
God intended our unity and our dwelling together in harmony.
And whether we're female or male or whatever, there is a place for us all to bring something that only we can bring to this one body of Christ.

Let's pray
God of Abraham
Of Isaac and Jacob
God of Paul
And Phoebe and Priscilla and Aquila
God of us all
You are bringing us together
In your holy kingdom of light
Where all will be free to be
All you made us to be
We are your servants
In this holy task
Show us what that means for each of us today
And always
In Jesus name
Amen.