

SERMON: Sunday – 23 July 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

The Way of the Cross and the Power of God - Good News for All People

Genesis 29:15-28

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

I want to think about God's power in our relationships and how it's in seeking to walk the way of the cross that is key to success in relationships whether that be in marriage or in any other form of companionship.

I'll talk about marriage because the Genesis story this week says something about marriage. But we'll also look at power in relationships in general and use Paul's writing about the cross to help us.

These two Bible passages are from the Women's Lectionary again and like other churches, we're following these readings at the moment along with some commentary put together by the Spill the Beans team.

Reading their material for this week, they say that we live in an age where a decreasing, but nonetheless present, portion of society likes to talk about 'biblical marriage' in a way that can sometimes cause great offence. The certitude of marriage being solely between one man and one woman is used as the argument against same-sex marriages as well as other relationships that do not fit within what is presumed to be 'normative'.

I'm not going to get into the debate on marriage today but we would probably do well to read the very little that Jesus said about marriage in Matthew 19 in which he really stressed the importance of a genuine, loving commitment in a time where divorce was just too easy for men to mis-use.

Anyway, our reading from Genesis today goes some way to dismissing entirely modern notions of what 'biblical marriage' might be. In fact, this passage is full of issues that cast up red flags to most western ears.

The story we are told includes the names and physical attributes of the two women Rachel and Leah, as well as the names of their two servants Bilhah and Zilpah but it is about Jacob. It is entirely seen from the point of view of the men. It is their father who is offering them, and it is Jacob who is bartering for them.

The women on the other hand are merely two-dimensional figures, their only value, it seems, is in their appearance, we are told nothing of their character here. Added to the treatment of the two daughters, we are confronted by the realities of life for those women with even fewer privileges. Both Bilhah and

Zilpah are given away, little more than property, as servants to Rachel and Leah.

This short passage from the Genesis story makes for uncomfortable reading. We are confronted by the challenges of following a bible written in a different time, different culture, and different mindset. We are shown descriptions of women that barely seem to recognise their humanity, and sadly for some even today, this does not seem so far removed from their experience.

The NIV translation epitomises this mindset perfectly in the descriptions given in verse 17. :

17 Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

And in verse 19, after Jacob B expresses his preference for Rachel,

19 Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man.

A commodity to be given away at the behest of her father.

For many women, old and young, their physical appearance often means more than their character or personality. Their value for some rests in what they look like rather than who or what they are. Indeed, many will read the descriptions of the relationships of the four women and see parallels with our own society. They will see that even amongst the oppressed, power is still unevenly divided.

Too often, it seems, women have existed at the bottom of the league tables of power.

Which is why the Bible, full of the realities of human life, is also full of a truth that seeks a different way.

And so it is helpful to read this story of one sort of oppression in light of the Gospel account exemplified in Paul writing to the persecuted early followers of the Jesus way. From the place of emptying himself and making himself nothing, Jesus reworked the meaning of true power in relationships. After encountering the Risen Jesus for himself, Paul then went on to write about it and preach about it.

For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Let's think about power in terms of those on top holding power and those below being powerless.

Richard Rohr recently wrote an article called, 'Stories from the bottom' in which he talks about the Bible as being one of the few subversive texts in history because it repeatedly and invariably legitimises the people on the bottom, not the people on the top. Rejected sons, barren women, sinners, lepers, or outsiders are always the ones chosen by God. In every case it seems there is some form of powerlessness—and from that situation God creates a new kind of power.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

We see loads of examples of this in the Bible. God showing barren women favour, like Sarah, Abraham's wife, barren and past child-bearing years when God blessed her with baby Isaac (Genesis 17:15–19). Rachel, Jacob's wife, barren until God "opened her womb" and she bore Joseph (Genesis 30:22–24). Barren Hannah poured out her soul before the Lord, and God gave her Samuel (1 Samuel 1).

God chose a "nobody," Abraham, and made him a somebody. God chose Jacob over Esau, even though Esau was the elder, more earnest son and Jacob was a shifty, deceitful character.

Election has nothing to do with worthiness but only divine usability, and in the Bible, usability normally comes from having walked through one's own wrongness or "littleness."

God chose Israel's first king Saul out of the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest and weakest tribe. The pattern always seems to be that "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16).

In case after case, the victim becomes the real victor, and this according to Richard Rohr, is how we are to understand power as what appears like the "folly of the cross" of Jesus.

We understand it through this bias from the bottom, seeing this preference for the poor and the humble.

In the early Christian Scriptures, the message of Jesus seems to have been heard in great part by people on the bottom. We see clearly in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels that people who are poor, in need of healing, or viewed as sinners tend to get the point. Those who are outside or at the edges of the

system understand Jesus, while those who are inside or at the centre are the ones who crucify him.

Theologians date a significant turning point to the year 313 CE, when the Emperor Constantine established Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and the Church began to think that linking up with power was a good way to spread the gospel message.

In truth, it became embarrassed by Jesus, as the powerless one. The message of the cross really was foolishness to those who thought they had to fight for recognition.

Most churches do the same, in their own way. We feel more comfortable with power than we do with powerlessness. Who actually wants to be like Jesus after all? Who wants to be powerless? On the surface it just doesn't look like a way of influence, access, or one that is going to make any difference.

After the year 313, Scripture interpretations do a 180-degree turn. Take the issue of war: a hundred years before 313, it was unthinkable that a Christian would fight in the army. Jesus' teaching on nonviolence was so self-evident.

To quote Mahatma Gandhi who said in 1948, "I am convinced that [Christianity] has distorted the message of Jesus.... When it had the backing of a Roman emperor it became an imperialist faith as it remains to this day."

Jesus taught nonviolence, lived nonviolently, and died nonviolently, but this goes right over our heads! We can't see it because we've spent seventeen hundred years interpreting Scripture from the top, from a place of fighting to be in control rather than accepting powerlessness, as Jesus did.

By the year 400 CE, the entire Roman army was supposedly Christian and were out to kill so called "pagans." After that it became near impossible to read anything in the Bible about nonviolence, powerlessness, or not being "winners."

I quoted the theologian Verna Dozier a couple of years ago who described how church changed after this,

Incense, the sign of respect for the emperor, began to appear in Christian churches. Ministers began dressing in more luxurious garments, processions and choirs developed, and eventually the congregation came to have a less active role in the worship.

And he went on to point out that more importantly, the gospel of good news to the poor instead saw riches and pomp as signs of divine favour. The coming kingdom of God was no longer the fundamental theme.

But the good news of the Way of Jesus is still the way. Its still the way to follow, the way to live and the way to see and be true change in the world.

The way of Christ means it is possible for people to begin to allow the necessary humiliation of the ego and defeat of the false self, that is always about self preservation and fighting to be in control, in order to undergo basic transformation into Christ likeness.

It's back to the first shall be last and the last shall be first and about taking a lower place.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

So if, like me, there are times when you struggle to carry your cross or you feel like it's hard to dwell in that lowly place, then try to be content to be where you are. Because that's where we're most likely to discover Christ and the Kingdom of God and together be lifted up by that strange but holy power.