

SERMON: 26 July 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

" God Breathes Through Our Dysfunction"

(Genesis 29:15-28)

1

The stories in the Book of Genesis are real life stories which we can all relate to. They are a bit like soap operas in many ways. In fact, I heard this week that Eastenders actually has a team of theological advisers and guess what? They often use the stories in Genesis as inspiration for their TV dramas.

And of course these stories also manage to teach us something about God and how God and people relate.

Even in the midst of human drama and dysfunction God can be found because God is Immanuel, God is with us.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the story of how Rebekah met Isaac and became his wife.

Well Rebekah and Isaac had a problem. They wanted to have a child but couldn't. And this went on for some 20 years. They carried that burden of disappointment and pain for 20 years.

Now, the Bible tells us that Isaac prayed about this and eventually Rebekah became pregnant when Isaac was around 60 years of age. Rebekah was probably much younger but certainly 20 years past the age of her marriage.

We can see something here about how God answers prayer. It may not be immediately.

2

We don't know if it was a painful pregnancy but we do know that the twins she was carrying had a great struggle.

And God tells them that the sons Rebekah is carrying will become two nations. Two peoples that who will always struggle with each other. One stronger than the other and the older serving the younger.

Esau and Jacob are born and even the circumstances of their birth indicate how they are going to be. Esau is red and hairy, a wild sort of man, a hunter. And Jacob comes out second grasping Esau's heel - a sign that he

will be a bit of a deceiver in later life. Yet it's through him that God's blessing appears strongest.

God's blessing can flow through all sorts, misfits, deceivers, sinners. There is no one, it seems that is outside of God's realm or kingdom.

And even in the struggle between Jacob and Esau we can see how in the end they come together to bury their father and make peace with each other after years of fear and hostility.

God is the maker of that peace and the source of unity for every strained relationship.

But things weren't easy between Jacob and Esau for a long time.

3

One day Esau sells his birthright to Jacob because he came in starving and desperate for a plate of stew.

Esau wasn't looking at the long term implications of his actions. He wanted a quick fix.

Jacob famously steals their father's blessing, with his mother's help, when he pretends to be Esau the oldest son.

Esau hated Jacob because of that and he planned to kill him.

Rebekah gets wind of this and plots to send Jacob away to her brother Laban.

And it's on the way that Jacob has a dreamy encounter with God in which God says clearly to him:

"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:15).

4

In the midst of the fear for his life, he needed that word. He needed to know that God promises to be with him and keep him wherever he would go.

That is the most significant promise that any of us can need to hear. That God is with us - even in the midst of the trial and the fear and the stress and the worry and the anxiety and the joy.

Jesus said to his disciples, I will be with you (Matthew 28).

God even tells him that all peoples will be blessed through him.

5

There was a cosmic element to Jacob's life. God says to him, your life has significance. It means so much more than what you can presently see. It can influence way beyond what you can imagine.

No wonder Jacob is able to get up from that dream and walk on into an unknown future with confidence.

Because by the time he gets near where Laban lives, he finds himself at the well and he has the confidence to roll back the stone covering the well so that Rachel can water her father's sheep.

Jacob can't understand why the shepherds are waiting til all the flocks are gathered before watering the sheep. He tells them it'd be better to water them and then let the sheep out to pasture rather than them all gather together at once. It seems Jacob has a good sense of how to look after sheep.

Sounds like he was a good shepherd. And that comes out later in the story when he becomes very successful looking after Laban's flocks, another sign of God blessing everything he did.

God works through us to bless others.

6

So Jacob meets Rachel and goes back with her to meet Uncle Laban and after staying there a month, Laban suggest Jacob should be paid for his work, even though he's a relative.

Jacob is clearly in love with Rachel and suggests he works 7 years for Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban agrees. But there's a problem that they all know but no one mentions.

Rachel is the youngest daughter. Leah would need to marry first. That was the convention.

Jacob doesn't talk about it - maybe he wasn't aware - though I suspect he was - maybe he was hoping Laban would overlook it and do what he agreed to.

Jacob the deceiver was about to be on the receiving hand of deceit. He was about to be deceived himself. He was about to get a taste of his own medicine.

Was the ancient wisdom coming back to meet him?

Whoever digs a pit will fall into it,
and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling.(Proverbs 26:27)

Or,

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.

(Galatians 6:7).

What goes around comes around

7

For 7 years Jacob worked and the time flew by because his heart was full of love for Rachel. It seems like a few days not 7 years.

We can know what that's like. When we fall in love or discover a true purpose, we give our everything to it and the time seems to fly past. We don't count the cost we just keep working towards the prize at the end.

Like the apostle Paul, who put it this way,

God has given us a true purpose in setting our sights on heavenly things as Christ lives with us and in us.

So for Jacob, at the end of the 7 years, Laban pulls a fast one and presents him with Leah not Rachel.

You have to ask yourself, how could he spend his wedding night with the wrong woman and not know it until it was too late?

Better not to dwell on the mechanics of that.

Laban the business man agrees to let Jacob have Rachel - as well as Leah - on condition he work another 14 years.

8

I'm conscious that I've been presenting this reflection from a very male perspective.

What would Rachel and Leah have thought of it all?

We're told that Jacob,

he loved Rachel more than Leah
(Genesis 29:30).

How would you feel if you were Leah? Unloved, rejected, second best.

Sure, Jacob had felt that too. Esau had been Isaac's favourite. And now he too had a favourite.

God, on the other hand has no favourites.

Favouritism causes so much dysfunction in families and God is seen acting to address that sin.

God's treating of all people equally, means that God is the most all embracing and inclusive concept there is.

And so the kingdom of God rejoices in that equality and growth towards oneness.

God has no sense of bias on no grounds - no superiority of one race over another, black or white, or on the grounds of gender, though much of the Bible is written from a male dominated perspective, that's not God.

Nor on the grounds of sexuality. Jesus said virtually nothing about sexuality so we'd be treading on thin ice to claim there is only one way for humans to be sexual in the world.

Nor on the grounds of religion - there was no sense that Jesus supported one religion over another. The kingdom of God was, and is, way above that.

Jesus lived and died to bring an end to favouritism and show the world a new way to be in the world.

Christ lives in us to write a new story of unity and love and forgiveness.

In the midst of all our dysfunctionality God has entered our lives to be with us and to bring about the heavenly vision of the kingdom of peace and unity.