

SERMON: Sunday – 30 July 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Seeking the Father's Kingdom - Living Worry Free

Genesis 31:14-35

Matthew 6:19-34

It's a simple enough message. But as with much of the Scriptures it's easy to say and hard to put into practise. But what matters is our intention. We seek. Even though we fall short time and time again. We keep on seeking. And maybe gradually it gets easier if we stick with it.

Today's reading from Genesis is another very real family drama with some very poor family relationships - accusations, jealousy, neglect, anger. Here we have a father, Laban, of two daughters, Leah and Rachel. And we see nothing but a litany of bad behaviour from the father as well as not so good behaviour from Jacob, Leah and Rachel. In fact no one in the story appears to behave well. As the Bible says, all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

It's helpful to put the story in context:

The last verse of the previous chapter, Genesis 30, tells us that Jacob had grown exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys.

And, of course, with great riches comes great responsibility. And having riches can make one a target of other people's jealousy. And so it was for Laban's sons who were saying,

"Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father."

Jacob heard they were saying these things, and the next verse tells us that Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favourably as he did before. Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you."

Genesis 31:1-3 NRSV

In a story of growing jealousy and unease there is the call from God to return to one's roots in him.

Always this will be the case. That the call of God is there calling people back from the pitfalls of this life to rely on his provision. Because that's what we were made to do. Not to get caught up in the fighting for survival but to rest in the provision of the One who is the Source of all good things.

Jacob stands us an example of one who heard that call and, despite his bouts of deceitful behaviour, started out on the journey back to where he came from.

He was right to move away from what was becoming a toxic environment to live in. Laban may have been his uncle but he didn't show any signs of true family loyalty.

Laban regarded his own daughters, Leah and Rachel, as foreigners. In other words, he disregarded them, and neglected to do for them as he should have. So much so that he had them sold off, albeit to his now nephew.

As if that weren't bad enough, he withheld the inheritance due to them.

Like me, you've probably come across examples of families falling out over inheritance. It can be a source of rift that sometimes never heals. It demands a sensitivity the like of which humans don't always find coming easily.

Someone in the crowd once asked Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." And Jesus said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?... Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Luke 12:1, 13-15 NRSV

A teaching that is given in the context of not to worry about clothes or food or possessions as our father in heaven knows exactly what we need and will make sure we get it.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."

Luke 12:32-33 NRSV

A daily prayer. Make me not greedy this day Lord. Give me this day the bread I need.

Back to Laban. Added to his catalogue of bad behaviour was, possibly worst of all, that he ignored God's advise to him in a dream.

God tells Laban in the dream not to say anything to Jacob, neither good nor bad. And what does Laban do when he catches up with Jacob? He confronts

him. He couldn't let it go. He just had to try and sort this his own way, which was probably the way of anger.

Its difficult at times to hold one's tongue. It takes courage, again, a kind of strength that relies on God's strength too sort what we might only inflame and make worse.

And it's so very hard to let things go completely. We feel when we've been wronged that we want to sort it rather than leave it for God to sort. It can be so hard to pray about things when we're angry but there is a way to pray it into the Lord's hands and leave it there.

What a friend we have in Jesus
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.

Added to all his failings, Laban shows us what it looks like to be a man of pretence; pretending to love his daughters and granddaughters whom he accuses Jacob of stealing from him; and pretending that if Jacob had told him he was leaving rather than sneaking away that he would have been generous and sent him away with singing and a musical tribute.

Laban sounds like a man full of hot air, of empty promises, unreliable, a schemer, wheeler-dealer; and perhaps in Jacob, the deceiver, he met his match.

The theft of Laban's household gods, whatever important ornaments they were, seems to serve as a kind of raw justice. Some would look upon the events and see that Laban was getting his just deserts. He was getting what had been coming for him; in the way he's mistreated others, he was getting a taste of his own medicine. He was reaping something of what he'd sown.

Jesus taught about that quite a lot; that people should be careful of how they acted in private for some day there deeds would be exposed and come to light. That people are to endeavour to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves.

And of course sometimes that might mean waiting for a reward by living in such a way in this world that we might be heavenly minded about our earthly business, for some might not see justice in this life, but in the life to come.

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Rather than the precious traits of loving kindness and generosity towards others, Laban's treasures were in what he owned, possessions that might be

carried away or stolen as happened when Rachel took what she felt she and her sister deserved. Rather than wait for a heavenly reward, Rachel took the opportunity to steal earthly possessions from her miserly father for she probably wasn't going to get it any other way.

Hers was at least in part a righteous anger at their father's neglect and a need to try to win some justice from an unjust situation. I'm not saying she did as God directed because the text doesn't tell us that and she still took them without permission so it couldn't be God's will for her to steal.

But likely we would be angry if we were treated as badly. The question for us all might be when to be angry and what to do with one's anger? Can we channel our righteous anger into righteous action or passionate prayer?

And God is so unlike the kind of father we see in Laban. Jesus shows us that we have a father in heaven who loves us unconditionally and who tells us, through Jesus, not to worry about anything, for he knows exactly what we need and will look after us and give us everything we need.

The Lord is my Shepherd. I have everything I need.

Let's pray

God our Father

May we not put our wealth or possessions above our trust in you

Thanks you that your goodness promises that all people will find everything they need in you

May we live towards this heavenly vision

Through the Way and the name of Jesus we pray

Amen