



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



# TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

## 27<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; 7 Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favour with my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand, for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have everything I want." So he urged him, and he took it. Genesis 33:1-11*

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21*

## Like seeing the face of God

We have just heard the final chapter of the Jacob and Esau saga. The whole story has been building up to this moment, when the two brothers, who have been estranged for decades, meet up for the first time (it's brilliant storytelling).

All the signs suggest that this is not going to be a good encounter. Time has not healed old wounds. Those wounds have merely been left untreated to fester. We heard last week how Jacob was so gripped with fear that he was about to run away yet again rather than face his fears.

It was typical Jacob. The deceptive and insincere brother, who spent his whole life dodging and running. But for his night-long wrestle with and blessing from God, he would not have crossed the river into Esau's land.

And today we hear about Esau, who comes to Jacob with a four-hundred-man party. This isn't a welcome party. This is unequivocally a war party. Esau is planning to finish the job he started all those years ago. This is a man still bitter and furious at the way he was treated and he is reacting in typical Esau fashion. While Jacob is deceptive and timid, Esau is brutish, emotionally erratic, and quick to resort to violence.

In other words, the dynamics that led to the estrangement all those years ago continue to ordain the actions of both brothers in their reunion. All the signs point to a playing out of the old conflict one more time.

I have to tell you a story. I have a friend, Jonathan Robinson. We studied together at Otago University and about the same time that I moved up to St Heliers, Jonathan also moved up to Auckland, taking up a post as the Biblical Studies lecturer at Carey Baptist College.

I went for a walk with Jonathan last week and, as theology-nerds like to do, I was talking about my sermon series on Jacob and Esau. It turns out that Jonathan had recently written an article on this exact passage – the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. The timing couldn't have been more perfect. He sent it through to me and I found it immensely helpful.

It's an excellent article, very readable, and freely available online if anyone is interested in going a bit deeper. Anyway, I owe many of the insights in this sermon to him.

He begins his article by bringing our passage today into conversation with the work of Rabbi Edwin Freidman. Freidman develops a theory called Emotional Systems Theory, which suggests that we human beings are hardwired to react emotionally within the network of relationships we find ourselves.

When someone is joyous and energetic and hopeful – that joy is contagious. Likewise, when someone is anxious or morose or aggressive, those emotions can catch on as well.

We tend to be reactive to the emotions of others. It's why it's highly ineffective to try to convince someone that they're wrong about something using rational arguments – because they're not reacting to the argument; they're reacting to your condescending and superior tone.

It's why there's such a thing as mob mentality. It's why church meetings can so often spiral into an anxious and distrustful space. Because someone will lob an emotional grenade into

the room, which others will react to and amplify. (Isabella and I were recently at a regional church gathering where that was the case)

We all act and react within complex emotional systems, says Freidman; and those emotional reactions are learned behaviours that can come to define a community or a family. In some cases, these emotional reactions are intergenerational. Unresolved trauma is passed down as children learn to behave like their parents.

And in his article, Jonathan suggests that this is exactly what's going on in the Jacob and Esau saga. Jacob's deceptive and coercive behaviour is a learned behaviour. He learns from his mother, Rebekah, who is the schemer behind the scenes.

And it's likely that Rebekah acted that way because of her own baggage. If you know your Genesis stories, you'll know that Rebekah's father-in-law Abraham had favoured one of his sons over the other. Abraham had favoured Isaac and his mother Sarah, sending Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness to fend for themselves. And while Rebekah married Isaac, the favoured son, she would have been very aware of that history, and very aware that just as Abraham had favoured Isaac over Ishmael, now Isaac favoured Esau over Jacob. In other words, her deceptive behaviour was an emotional reaction to previous family conflict.

And of course, there's the infamous story of Abraham being prepared to slaughter his own son, Isaac, as an offering to God. I don't know what that does to a person psychologically, but I imagine Isaac wouldn't have been the most secure individual after that experience!

So, this is a family with intergenerational trauma, where deception and coercion and defensiveness are learned behaviours.

The reason why I'm spending so long establishing this is to highlight just how significant this moment of reconciliation is between Jacob and Esau. Behind this moment is a whole emotional system and deeply ingrained behaviours that have arisen out of intergenerational trauma. Jacob and Esau are not merely autonomous individuals. They are deeply connected to one another and to their past, acting and reacting within the system they find themselves. They are enslaved by it.

But then two things happen in our story today that break this destructive cycle. The first, we already heard about last week. In an exhausting wrestle with God, Jacob confronts his fears and chooses to stop running. He crosses the river into the land of his brother and sends ahead of him lavish gifts to set the tone of the meeting to come.

When Esau finally comes into view with his four-hundred-man army, again Jacob does not run away. Instead, we're told today, he does something entirely uncharacteristic. He stops hiding and instead runs toward Esau, going ahead of his family and everything he owned. He presents himself before Esau alone, exposed, and entirely at his brother's mercy. There is no coercion, no deception. Simply Jacob, bowing to his brother in humility, begging for forgiveness.

The second thing that happened is that Esau is deeply moved by Jacob's actions. He runs towards his estranged brother, and they embrace and weep together. The two brothers are reconciled.

Jacob captures the significance of the moment when he exclaims, "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favour."

What a stunning line. “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.” It’s a profound insight: that when we forgive one another, when we “act favourably” towards one another, choosing to look past old wrongs, there is something in us that is actively imitating the very nature of God. A God of grace.

In that moment, when Jacob puts himself at the mercy of Esau and Esau forgives Jacob, the toxic emotional system and the cycle of intergenerational trauma is broken. In Jonathan Robinson’s words: there is a “radical and conscious break in the established emotional patterns that allow the creation of a new emotional world.” A new way of relating to one another. A new way of being human together in community, which is built not on retributive violence but on grace.

I wonder if that’s what Paul is talking about in our passage from 2 Corinthians. In Christ, he says, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away”. God has “reconciled us to himself through Christ and” – this is vital – “and has given us that ministry of reconciliation.” In other words, in Christ we encounter the God of grace. And to follow this Christ is to meet one another in grace. To be reconciled to one another. To be a people characterised by vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to forgive.

And when we do so, you could say – as Paul does – that we are no longer regarding one another from “a human point of view”, held captive by the prescribed emotional patterns that shape us. No, we begin to regard one another as fellow siblings in Christ Jesus. Our relationships are defined by our newness in him rather than by the mistakes of our past. We are freed from the emotional patterns that enslave us.

Before I conclude, I would like to make one final point. The story of Jacob and Esau actually goes on a bit longer. There’s a kind of postscript, which we didn’t hear today. But it is significant.

Having been reconciled, Esau invites Jacob to go back home with him to live together on the land of their father. However, Jacob insists that Esau go on alone, because Jacob will be slower with his children and livestock. He promised to join Esau later, but didn’t want to hold his brother up. So Esau goes back home without Jacob.

Jacob, though, does not do what he promised. Instead, he takes his family and settles elsewhere. We don’t know why exactly. But even in this final moment of reconciliation, Jacob continues to be the deceiver. He lies and deceives his brother one last time.

The suggestion is that, even when we imitate God by stepping beyond our regular patterns, actually old habits die hard. Jacob is still the person he always was, defaulting to his regular behaviour. There’s something very real about this. Every family or church community will know that living together with other people can be immensely frustrating. We commit the same mistakes again and again and again.

For that reason, Jesus told his disciples to keep forgiving others, not seven times but seven times seven. Never stop. I finish with a quote from Jonathan’s article: “Ultimately, Jacob is part of our [genealogy] of faith ... he is our tipuna (ancestor), and he confirms for us that basic to our identity as the people of God is that we are the ones who need to be forgiven, [indeed] who are saved by forgiveness ... So, when we truly forgive others we become like God, but we never forget that what grace we might offer others is a pale reflection of the forgiveness and mercy shown to us in God’s priceless reconciling gift of Jesus Christ.” Amen.