



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 6th August 2023, 10th Sunday after Pentecost

21 Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22 The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. 23 And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger." 24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle, so they named him Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel, so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. 27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. 29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30 Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) 31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" 33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. Genesis 25:21-34

27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 In contrast, God is why you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

The elder shall serve the younger

If you've been around the last few months, you'll remember that we've spent quite a lot of time in the Gospel of Matthew. We also spent a few weeks after Easter in the letter of First Peter. Both New Testament books. I'd like us to spend a bit of time in the Old Testament.

For Christians, the Old Testament can easily get neglected. It's a lot longer than the New Testament with many boring parts, from long annals of Jewish national history, to dozens of archaic laws; and many challenging parts – stories of genocide, murder, and abuse that are not fit for younger audiences and need to be handled with care. If the world of the New Testament feels removed from our own, the Old Testament can often feel like a different planet entirely.

All that to say, it's far simpler to spend most of our time in the New Testament and to see the Old as simply paving the way to Jesus. And there's nothing wrong with that per se. In fact, Jesus himself was very selective as to which parts of the Old Testament he used as he interpreted the scriptures in light of himself.

But it is still worth spending time in the Old Testament, getting to know it intimately. It is full of rich stories and poetry and history that help us to grapple with the profound truths of human existence and the God who meets us in the midst of it. It's literature that has captured the imagination of countless generations of Jews, including Jesus; literature that became the foundation stone on which Christianity was built; literature that has profoundly shaped Western society and the world we live in today.

One of those great stories is the story of Jacob. I wonder what you know about Jacob and his brother Esau... It's a story has many layers. So, on one level, it is a story about Jewish national identity within the geopolitical context of the ancient near-east. Jacob, as we will hear in a couple of weeks, was renamed Israel, which means "one who struggles with God." His brother Esau was also called Edom, which is the same name as a small nation on Judah's southern border. So this is a story of Israel's fraught relationship with Edom and more generally about its political context and national identity.

At another level though, it is a story that touches on universal human themes: a tale of familial conflict between two brothers, a tale of deception and lies and estrangement, a tale of healing and forgiveness. And it's a tale about God, a God who is intimately involved in our human interactions; a God who journeys with Jacob as he flees from his brother, leading him towards reconciliation.

On this level, it is a deeply human story that has the power to speak profoundly to us today. One that can open our eyes to God's presence in our own messy, frail, complex lives.

So, onto the story. It begins, as we heard today, with Rebekah becoming pregnant with twins, though she had been unable to conceive. It's an apparent miracle. An answer to Isaac's prayer.

But right away it becomes clear that something's not right. For her sons, we're told, were struggling together in her womb, jostling for space. She took it as a bad omen. A sign of things to come. And so, she goes to "inquire of the Lord".

The Lord answers her, confirming her fears. God tells her:

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger.”

It's a puzzling beginning to the story. Like Rebekah, we might quite rightly “inquire of the Lord” who, on the one hand, blesses her with a pregnancy that she so wanted and, on the other hand, tells her that her children are fated to live in perpetual struggle. God, it seems, is the author of both the blessing and the conflict. What sort of God is this, we might ask?

The prophecy ends up coming true. As we were told in our reading today, Jacob, the younger child, coerces Esau into selling his birth right. As the eldest son, Esau was the inheritor of his father's property and wealth. He was the future head of the family. But Jacob jumps the queue and steals it off him. And later, through an act of deception, he receives his father's dying blessing, which was also reserved for Esau.

In other words, through deception and coercion, Jacob steals what is not his. And the things is... God appears to be entirely behind this or at least not opposed to it...

... which might be understandable if Jacob was the better brother; if he was more morally upright. Basically, if there was a reason why God might favour him over Esau.

But there's not. The author of the story makes no effort to try and dress Jacob up as morally superior. He is a liar and a deceiver, who will resort to coercive and dishonest means to get his way. He's not nice. He's not likable.

To be honest, Esau comes across better. Sure, he gets angry and seeks revenge against Jacob – but that's at least understandable and relatable. After all, he was cheated of everything that was his. Esau is sincere and honest, and (spoiler alert) at the end of the story he forgives his brother in an act of remarkable grace.

So why should Jacob get God's blessing and not Esau? Esau is not only the more morally upright person. By right, the birth right and the blessing were his in the first place. Why wouldn't God simply do nothing and let things take their right and natural course?

... but maybe that's precisely the point the author is making. In this story, it's as if God is deliberately challenging the natural course of things; intentionally disrupting our expectations of who deserves what and why.

After all, it is by chance that Esau was born before Jacob. One had to come first. Esau was older than Jacob by a mere few seconds, and yet that accident of history was the difference between one inheriting everything and the other inheriting nothing. One had. The other had not.

You could even argue that Jacob's deceptive and immoral behaviour was due to the fact that he had nothing. Maybe Esau would have behaved in the same way if their roles were flipped.

In other words, this is a story that challenges the status quo of birth right, according to which the eldest son would inherit everything as a matter of course (the daughters, you won't be surprised to hear, don't even get a look in).

The cultural practice of birth right has existed for much of history. For us today, it seems like an archaic concept largely belonging to the past. As a middle child, I'm thankful that's the case. I'm thankful that my parents seek to support me and my siblings equally.

That being said, I'm not sure it's quite as irrelevant to our own context as we might think it is. In fact, I would say the whole reality of birth right is still alive and well. Maybe not at familial level. But certainly, at a societal level.

For instance, it remains true that some are born into wealth and comfort while others are born into poverty and struggle. It remains true that some have power and agency and privilege as a matter of course while others do not. It remains true that the family you're born into determines so much about what you will experience and make of life.

A child born of a refugee escaping war in Syria will have vastly different opportunities in life than a child born in St Heliers New Zealand into a family that has been settled there for four generations, who will have vastly different opportunities to a Samoan child born in Māngere to a solo mum who works three jobs. Some have. Others have not.

There is something foolish and ridiculous about God siding with Jacob over Esau. But maybe that's the point. God does not care for our systems, rules and traditions that determine arbitrarily that some should have while others have not. God sides with Jacob not because he deserves it, but because the rules-based world into which he was born needs to be overturned.

It's a common theme in the scriptures. God sides time and again with the have-nots, subverting our expectations, and overturning the unequal and unjust systems of our world.

In this way, Jacob paves the way for Jesus, in whom the subversive love of God is made supremely known. As Paul put it in our reading from Corinthians: "In Christ, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; what is weak in the world to shame the strong; what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God."

In light of this, it seems significant to me that, in the story of Jacob, God is involved not only in the healing and the reconciliation. God is also involved in the conflict and the tearing apart. In fact, our reading today suggests that God caused, ordained, the conflict and the struggle.

The God of Jacob – and the God of Jesus – is a God who is disrupting the arbitrary inequality in our world. God is shaking and stirring things up. Even causing conflict between the haves and the have nots. Lifting the veil. Not so that we destroy one another in the process. But so that our eyes might be opened to injustice; and so that we may gradually, by grace, move like Jacob and Esau towards reconciliation, equality and fullness of life together.

Such is the wisdom of the cross. Thanks be to God. Amen