

Reflection 12/7/20 Text; Genesis 25:19-34 Fiona McDougal.

Readings:

Genesis 25:19-34 New Living Translation (NLT)

The Births of Esau and Jacob

¹⁹This is the account of the family of Isaac, the son of Abraham. ²⁰When Isaac was forty years old, he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan-aram and the sister of Laban the Aramean.

²¹Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was unable to have children. The LORD answered Isaac's prayer, and Rebekah became pregnant with twins. ²²But the two children struggled with each other in her womb. So she went to ask the LORD about it. "Why is this happening to me?" she asked.

²³And the LORD told her, "The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son."

²⁴And when the time came to give birth, Rebekah discovered that she did indeed have twins! ²⁵The first one was very red at birth and covered with thick hair like a fur coat. So they named him Esau. ²⁶Then the other twin was born with his hand grasping Esau's heel. So they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when the twins were born.

Esau Sells His Birthright

²⁷As the boys grew up, Esau became a skilful hunter. He was an outdoorsman, but Jacob had a quiet temperament, preferring to stay at home. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating the wild game Esau brought home, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹One day when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau arrived home from the wilderness exhausted and hungry. ³⁰Esau said to Jacob, "I'm starved! Give me some of that red stew!" (This is how Esau got his other name, Edom, which means "red.")

³¹"All right," Jacob replied, "but trade me your rights as the firstborn son."

³² “Look, I’m dying of starvation!” said Esau. “What good is my birthright to me now?”

³³ But Jacob said, “First you must swear that your birthright is mine.” So Esau swore an oath, thereby selling all his rights as the firstborn to his brother, Jacob.

³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew. Esau ate the meal, then got up and left. He showed contempt for his rights as the firstborn.

Excerpt from “The Tradition of Meditation for a Time of Crisis”, Laurence Freeman OSB

Every time we sit to meditate, we are entering a tradition. Faith is the active passing on of this tradition. Tradition doesn’t mean a freezer-fresh set of beliefs or customs or rituals. It is not something that is frozen in time. Tradition itself literally means a passing on, a handing on, *tradere*. It’s like a relay race, a passing on without dropping the baton, and it is this passing on of a wisdom, of this knowledge, of this capacity for faith.

When my Mum died just over a year ago, my sisters and I went over to her house to choose a few things as keepsakes. It was not an easy choice particularly for me as I had limited space in my suitcase. Strangely enough we didn’t squabble over this, but each quietly found what was most important to us, OK’d this with each other, and also set aside some things other members of the family might like.

So now when I have special guests I can bring out Mum’s poppy crockery and tablecloth and recall how she loved having visitors and being a hostess.

A cross stitch she made of Bennachie, the hill in Aberdeenshire where we scattered her ashes hangs in my kitchen. Our family walked up and down its stony tracks to the Iron Age fort at the Mither Tap at various points throughout our lives.

And a painting by one of Mum's neighbours, Scottish Borders artist Charles Simpson, takes me back to the year I spent living with Mum in her house "Hillend" in the tiny village of Clovenfords.

These things mean a lot to me and have helped me as I have got used to living in a world without my Mum.

But perhaps the most precious gift she left all three of us sisters is the gift of music- a living gift, that has passed through earlier generations of my family and on to the generations that follow. My grandfather played cello in cinema in the days of silent films and his whole family made music together. My mother was a church organist and choir director, becoming a music teacher and leading singing groups until the last year of her life. My sisters and I conduct, play instruments and sing. And my nieces have followed suit. Even my 3 year old great niece goes to Music Makers and warbles away happily. The wonderful thing about music is of course, that it is also a shared gift, one that can involve and enrich others.

There is something of this quality of living gift within the story of Jacob and Esau that we heard read to us today.

We can follow the flow of that living gift through the stories of Genesis, as we hear of Abraham and Sarah leaving their home country and the promise that a great nation will be birthed through them, on into the life of Isaac and Rebekah and their troublesome twins Jacob and Esau, continuing in Jacob's 12 sons, ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. The effect of these foundational narratives flows on through the Hebrew Scriptures and into the Gospels and New Testament Letters, down through 2000 years of church history and into our lives today.

Perhaps we can learn something about the nature of that gift by focusing on this particular story in our tradition....

The goings on in the family of Isaac and Rebekah have a lot in common with some of our modern day soap operas. There is a long awaited conception, the bonus of a twin pregnancy followed rapidly by concern about the violent movements within Rebekah's womb. The unsettling words Rebekah receives in her search for an answer cast a long shadow over the lives these two boys

would go on to live. From the day of their birth, physically and psychologically Jacob and Esau are very different. An ominous note is struck when it is said that “Isaac loved Esau... but Rebekah loved Jacob. The stage is set for the next scene.

The sibling rivalry noted so early becomes more overt when Jacob takes advantage of Esau in a vulnerable moment and persuades him to sell him his birthright as first born son. Later in the story, (Genesis 27:28-29) Jacob again tricks his brother out of what is rightfully his by impersonating him and fooling the partially sighted Isaac into giving him the important final blessing. As a result Jacob has to flee to his Uncle Laban’s land and the twins do not meet again for over 20 years.

A few words about “birthright” and “blessing” might be helpful at this point since they refer to key moments in Jacob’s story. For me “birthright” means something that is taken for granted, almost an entitlement, that comes from the past. “Blessing” seems a bit more general and aspirational, bringing depth of intention towards future possibilities.

In the context of Jacob and Esau’s story there are more specific meanings. The “birthright” referred to the normal rights of the eldest son, a double share of the inheritance and leadership of the family (Coogan 2010). With that came various rights and responsibilities including caring for the extended family. (Zondervan 2016). This was not something to be given away lightly.

But the birthright itself was only the first part of what could be passed on. Obtaining the “birthright” put Jacob in a good position to receive the final patriarchal “blessing”, This would confirm Jacob as leader of the clan and heir to the previous promises made to Abraham. It was stronger than just a wish for the future, bearing the weight of words of prophesy, with the implication that God would ensure it happened. (Arnold, 2003)

Genesis 27:28-29 recounts the final blessing given to Jacob by Isaac.

²⁸ May God give you heaven’s dew
and earth’s richness—
an abundance of grain and new wine.

²⁹ May nations serve you

and peoples bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed
and those who bless you be blessed.”

So did the promised blessing actually come to Jacob? Although I knew that according to the Hebrew Scriptures, Jacob's 12 sons go on to become the 12 tribes of Israel, the outcome of the rest of the blessing wasn't so clear to me. In fact BOTH brothers are reported to have had lands, family and flocks. However a little bit of exploration revealed that Jacob did settle on his father's land at Succoth and Esau had moved further away to Seir. (Genesis 33:16-17). And further on in the Biblical narrative, Jacob's descendants, the people of Israel do indeed have power over Esau's descendants, the Edomites. (1 Kings 11:14-22, 2 Kings 8:20-22)

As a younger twin myself, I have a certain sympathy for Jacob. My twin sister is only three minutes older than me yet she has always been, and will always be the oldest sister in our family. But even I can see from this narrative that there were some rather nasty character traits in Jacob. He comes across as a bit sneaky, dishonest and manipulative, taking advantage of his brother to achieve his own ends. The trouble that results from his actions towards Esau haunts him to the end of his days. His life with his uncle is unhappy and fraught (Genesis 29-31) and his later reconciliation with Esau is very partial (Genesis 33). En route he struggles even with God (Genesis 32:24-32). And the conflict which has played such a part in his life passes on to his own sons and their life as a family together. (Genesis 37) (Brueggeman 1982)

My feeling was that perhaps Jacob brought all this conflict on himself, a result of his rather unpleasant behaviour. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman has a different interpretation.

Brueggeman sees this narrative as “radical” and ‘revolutionary’. His suggestion is that from the words proclaimed to Rebekah during her troubled pregnancy, through the events of Jacob's life, normal expectations about power relations are challenged. And that this overturning of expectations says something about the nature of the God of Jacob. This God does the

unexpected and has a bias towards the underdog. From this perspective, the conflict that is such a feature in Jacob's life is a natural, though unfortunate by product of a countercultural bias. (Breuggeman 1982)

It's an intriguing argument, and there are further strands to it that there is not space to discuss here. But I'm not entirely convinced. Jacob himself shows no bias towards the underdog and in fact enjoys all the power and benefits of his position.

I think rather, that this is a story of a "mixed up blessings" in more ways than one. Not only is there a mix up in that the younger and culturally "wrong" son gets the blessing. Jacob himself is mixed up. His life is mixed up. He is not the person he "should" be. And his life doesn't go in the straight line it in theory "should" but has many twists and turns and dead ends. Yet despite this and the conflict that is so much part of his life the Biblical narrative is insistent. The blessing flows on through Jacob and his descendants. The good news is that we are heirs of that blessing ourselves, as it flows on **to us**, and **through us**, though our own lives are not perfect either

The blessing in Genesis 27 was seen in terms of territory and fertility, of status and power. As those who can claim this birthright of faith and have inherited the blessing through our tradition, what can the blessing look like for us? I love the words that Lawrence Freeman uses in the contemporary reading to convey the handing on of a tradition. He speaks of "a wisdom", "knowledge" and "capacity for faith". This is not about rigid belief systems but about something deeper, alive, and dynamic.

So just as I asked myself at my Mum's house in Scotland, there are questions we need to ask about what to keep and what to let go. "What do we wish to take with us, to put in our individual suitcases to treasure, remind us and sustain us on our journey forward. What of our inheritance can each of us use and nurture to be a living gift for others?". Perhaps we could also ask "what do we wish to place in our communal shipping container to use in our future life together?".

Answering these questions is a bit of a process. This could be about any number of things. It could be about recognising the countercultural bias of Jacob's God and embodying that principle in our lives. It could be about

appreciating the richness and variety of truths that can be found in these ancient tales and looking ways to creatively express those truths for our world today. Or perhaps it could be about being grounded in a long tradition and inviting others to also explore being part of that greater breadth and depth.

We know the value of tradition, otherwise why would we be celebrating 180 years of our existence? Why would we be gathering and explaining important words, stories and objects which reflect who we are? And why would we join with others on Petone's windy foreshore and gaze out across the water imagining those who came before us?

And we have structures within our community to support this ongoing process of deciding what to take on our journey and what to leave behind. Let's do the individual work of feeling and thinking our way towards some answers. Let's share those with each other and have the courage and conviction to put them into practice together.

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