

Reflection for Thursday June 18th 2020.

Jacob – Rev Wendy Carter

Tonight we're considering the Old Testament character of Jacob, one of the three Patriarchs. The story is a good one, it features in Genesis 25:19 – end 35.

We heard in the last couple of weeks about his grandfather Abraham being promised that he would be blessed by God and have descendants 'as numerous as the stars of heaven.' We heard that Abraham lived believing God's promise over many years, even after his wife Sarah thought the promise was impossible because they were so old.

We heard about angelic visitors to Abraham's camp at the Oaks of Mamre. They said that a child would be born to Sarah within the year, Sarah had laughed out loud! But God was true to the promise and a year later Isaac was safely delivered to great joy and celebration.

Isaac was the only son of Abraham and his wife Sarah and when it came time for him to marry, the bride chosen was a cousin, Rebekah. After 20 years waiting Rebekah gave birth to twin sons – the elder Esau, named to reflect that he was born red and hairy, followed by Jacob holding tightly onto his brother's heel.

The twins grew up quite different in character and skills – Isaac's favourite was Esau, 'a skilful hunter, a man of the field' who made great game stew, but Rebekah loved Jacob, 'a quiet man living in tents.' Perhaps Esau was a man who lived in the moment. Jacob more thoughtful, more perceptive, and as we shall see, on the lookout for the main chance!

So one afternoon Esau came in hungry from hunting, to smell Jacob's lentil stew and new bread.

"I'm famished! give me a bowl of that before I expire!"

"Ok! food now in exchange for your birthright. Agreed? "

“Yes deal! I need something to eat NOW! “

Esau showed no respect for his role as the eldest son. Jacob resorted to trickery. Not what we might expect from a founding father of the nation.

When Isaac was old and blind, and he thought death was not far away. He called Esau to him. “

“Go out with your bow and make me one of those tasty game stews and after I’ve eaten I’ll tell you what you will get when I die and I’ll bless you, my eldest son.”

Esau rushed out to hunt, but listening was Rebekah; she called Jacob

“Go and fetch a couple of young kids to cook for your father – I have a plan to make you the heir!”

So when his son arrived carrying a dish smelling delicious, Isaac welcomed him

The voice seemed softer than Esau’s but the arms were hairy and his clothes smelled of the outdoors, but Jacob had put on Esau’s clothes and wrapped goat skin on his arms. His father was fooled and gave his Blessing. Control of the family and good fortune would be Jacob’s.

But Jacob was a cheat: surely God doesn’t work with someone who thinks only of himself?

Shortly Esau arrived back to camp with the food he had caught.

“Here you are father, caught and cooked just for you!”

“Well who just received my blessing? He smelled right, he was as hairy as you. Jacob! “

The blessing had been given and could not be recalled. Isaac had been fooled.

Esau was very, very angry.

“I’ll kill him! He has deceived our father and cheated me. I WILL KILL HIM!”

Rebekah heard Esau’s anger.

“Go Jacob! Run! Go to my brother Laban in Paddan-aram and stay till your brother’s anger is spent.”

So Jacob ran; when darkness came he lay down in the open using a stone for a pillow. At last, afraid, alone, ashamed he was ready to listen to God and he fell asleep.

As he slept, he watched angels as they used a stairway set up between earth and heaven and he was aware that God was there and speaking to him.

“I am the God of Abraham and Isaac. The promise I made to them I make to you. This is your land. Your descendants will be very many and all the families on earth will be blessed through you. I will always be with you and protect you and I will bring you back to this land. “

When Jacob woke, he was awestruck!

“Surely God is in this place and I did not know. This is the gateway to heaven.”

He stood his pillow stone on end to be a pillar, to mark the place and he called it Bethel. He met the reality of God in a dream and it changed his life. He began a relationship with the Almighty who would guide and protect him and he would honour God. God would work with him despite the deception -and Jacob would discover wisdom.

When he reached his uncle’s, he met the younger daughter Rachel bringing her flock to drink water from the well and fell in love with her. He stayed a month and then agreed to work for his uncle Laban for seven years, for the right to marry Rachel. The years past and the wedding took place – but the veiled bride was not Rachel but the elder daughter Leah. The cheat had been cheated! He had to agree to work another seven years to marry Rachel as well.

When he left 20 years later, he was a very different man, in that time he had been used and exploited. Finally he knew it was time to go home and face Esau’s wrath!

Jacob now had 2 wives and 2 concubines, 11 sons and a daughter. He was very aware that God has been with him in the difficulties and blessed him with flocks and herds. Would he be with him in the next test?

Jacob sent messages ahead to his brother and gifts of livestock to show peaceful intention. He was told Esau is on his way with 400 armed men. So, the night before they would meet Jacob sent everyone safely across the ford of Jabbok. He camps alone on the opposite bank. Through the dark hours he wrestles with God and his hip joint is wrenched as they struggle. As dawn breaks he asks a blessing from his assailant.

“What is your name? “

“Jacob”.

“Your name is no longer Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with the divine and prevailed.”

In the morning he limps onwards toward meeting Esau, and receives a hearty welcome and forgiveness. The family have come home to Canaan, as God promised. On the journey to Bethlehem Rachel dies giving birth to Israel's twelfth son Benjamin. Jacob loved Rachel, but he has her sons Joseph and Benjamin with him. Joseph is his favourite of all, which will lead to trouble! The 12 sons give their names to the tribes of Israel; Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin. The only daughter is Dinah. The end of Jacob's life is spent in Egypt and that is part of the story of his son Joseph.

God knows the potential and possibilities in Jacob as well as the weakness, as he does with all of us. Working with God, Israel is part of the great plan to bless the world through Jesus from the tribe of Judah.

For some lockdown has given us time to reflect on our lives. Time to remember things we usually keep well hidden, out of mind. Most of us can recall something that makes us ashamed. The Bible is full of people who sometimes do wrong, make mistakes – think of King David, Simon Peter, Paul, but God forgives and uses the best of us, if we trust our lives to his hands.