

Online Sermon – 12 Jul 2020

'God uses imperfect people'

"It looks like a tornado came through here! You clean this mess up right now!"

Have you ever said those words before? I suspect all parents have been astounded by the incredible capacity of children for making messes. What if we could use that? What if instead of being frightened, frustrated and overwhelmed by their messes, we created something astonishing from it; something that builds relationships and teaches skills without driving us crazy? What if the rubble became a symbol of growth? What if clutter could bring order?

In some ways the life of faith is rather like that. God uses us to create wonderful things. God uses imperfect people to do amazing things. Out of the rubble that we create for ourselves God creates something that can inspire, both others and ourselves. God brings order to chaos.

Today's scripture from Genesis chapter 25, is a classic example of how God uses imperfect people to further his kingdom. The reading tells the story of the birth of the twins, Jacob and Esau, and the rivalry between them, which began in Rebekah's womb and lasted for most of their lives.

At the beginning of chapter 25 in Genesis, we hear that Abraham had died. Ishmael, one of his two sons, had chosen to live away from the Promised Land. So it was up to Abraham's other son, Isaac, to produce descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky or sand on the seashore.

But things were not looking good in that department. Isaac had been married to Rebekah for about 20 years, and as yet they had no children. Isaac was going on sixty and it was looking like a repeat of the same problem that confronted his father and mother, Abraham and Sarah. So Isaac prayed. His prayer was heard and Rebekah became pregnant. The prayer of Isaac was answered.

But it wasn't an easy pregnancy. The children struggled together with one another in the womb. If we look to the original Hebrew we find that it must have been one almighty struggle, for the original word is closer in meaning to, 'break', 'crush' or 'oppress'. In the womb, they 'crushed' one another.

So Rebekah wonders, 'Why is this happening to me?' and prays to God. She gets an answer, but probably not the one she wanted to receive. The Lord told 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."

Once they are born, we see that the two boys, though twins, are very different—different in appearance, interests, in which parent favorites them, and how they act in the world.

Even as they were being born, their rivalry showed itself. The first child born was red and hairy, and was named, 'Esau', which means 'hairy'. The second child was born holding Esau's heel, and he was named, 'Jacob', which means, 'heel catcher' or 'supplanter'.

Fancy naming your children, 'hairy' and 'grabby'. But once you know the story of their lives, their names make sense. For example, 'Grabby' was ambitious and he wanted to have Esau's birthright. His moment came one day, perhaps during a famine, when he was cooking a lentil stew. Esau came in from the field and said to Jacob,

'Give me some of that red stuff, for I am famished'

Jacob agreed, but on one condition. Esau had to give Jacob his birthright. You see, that the child born first was entitled to double the inheritance and all the kudos that went with being treated as the firstborn son. That appealed to the ambitious Jacob.

In contrast, the impetuous Esau didn't value his birthright. He effectively said,

'Ah, so what, what good is a birthright to me?'

He didn't value what was rightfully his, and so it was passed on to Jacob.

This story is remarkably like modern day families, in the divisions that they displayed. Part of what is so fascinating about the Old Testament stories is just how very human the characters all seem to be. They are so like modern day people. Ambitious, divided, conniving, dishonest: you name it, and they did it. And they are like us here today. Esau didn't value his birthright and so he lost it.

The Church too has been given something very special that we would be wise not to under-value. The Church, and that includes every-one of us who follow Christ, have been entrusted with the Good News about Christ. We are called to do what we can to ensure that this message is passed on to others and to live a life worthy of that calling. I wonder what we can learn about this from today's passage?

Fortunately, we are not alone. God does not desert us, but instead chooses to use imperfect people in order to achieve his purpose.

The real lesson from today's reading is less about dysfunctional families than about how God used them to achieve his purpose. God heard the prayer of Isaac, and so Isaac and Rebekah had children. God answered the prayer of Rebekah as the children struggled together within her, although the answer received might not have been the one she hoped for. God did for them what they could not do for themselves. God used imperfect people.

The good news for us today is that in spite of all of our faults, God finds ways to work with us. In spite of our weaknesses and sin, God makes use of us in remarkable ways. God transforms a mess into his Kingdom.

I remember how, in one of the churches I attended, some children were given the task of reading the Bible. At first, they were not very good, they spoke too quietly and too quickly, but as they gained experience they ended up better readers than most of the adults because they were willing to listen to advice and change their behavior. God uses imperfect people.

I wonder if our church has divisions that need healing? I wonder how many gifts our church communities have that are currently not being used? I wonder if God is calling any of us to do something new and exciting? We have good reason to be hopeful, for the life of faith does not depend on us. As we hear in the book of Isaiah,

"55:10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 55:11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Amen.