

Sermon - 26 July 2020 - 'God uses the unwanted to bless the world'

Over the last two Sundays, we have heard about the struggle between Jacob and Esau, and how Jacob, in fear of his twin brother, left the land that had been promised to Abraham & Isaac. And we also heard, how on the way to the uncle Laban's place in the far north, Jacob slept and dreamed of a ladder reaching from the earth to the heavens. In this dream, angels of God were going up and down the ladder, and God promised to be with Jacob and to protect him, wherever he might go.

In this week's reading from Genesis, we meet Jacob's uncle Laban, and his two daughters Leah and Rachel. We hear that Jacob loved Rachel, who was the younger of the two daughters, and was happy to work seven years for Laban in order to marry her. The scripture says that those seven years seemed to Jacob, 'but a few days', because of the love he had for her. Now when the seven years were up Jacob said to Laban: "*Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.*"

Now this is where today's story really gets interesting. Laban preferred that Jacob should marry Leah, because she was the firstborn daughter, and perhaps also because he wanted to trick Jacob into working for him for more years. So Laban *swapped* the two daughters, and brought Leah instead of Rachel to Jacob. Jacob, surprisingly, was deceived and didn't discover the truth until the morning! The scripture does go into the details of how Jacob was so easily fooled, but I suspect it was a combination of booze, veils, darkness and a lack of conversation.

The trickster was tricked! Jacob, the con artist, was conned just as he had tricked his own father into giving him the blessing, instead of his brother Esau. Jacob is understandably furious at Laban, but to no avail, it was too late now. Laban does give Rachel in marriage seven days later, but extracts another seven years of service from Jacob. Poor Leah! Poor Rachel! Imagine being Rachel, preparing for the wedding and suddenly being swapped. Imagine being Leah and being forced to marry someone who really wanted someone else all along, and then having to live with the two of them for the rest of your life!

When we listen to this story from Genesis we probably struggle to see any evidence of God working. What is the good news in today's reading from Genesis? What is the message of grace? It all appears a great mess, dominated by deception, rather than by love, and there is no mention of God at all. Even the depth of Jacob's love for Rachel is rather suspect, for he certainly must not have known her very well to be so easily deceived.

But if we look beyond today's reading and understand what comes later in Genesis, it becomes clearer that God is working through this terribly mixed up family. Jacob was very important in the history of Israel, for he was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Do these names sound familiar: Judah, Levi, Reuben, Benjamin, Zebulun? Well, these are some of the sons of Jacob, and they had tribes named after them. It gets a bit complicated, so I won't go into details. But I am sure you get the drift, Jacob and his children were very important. And here comes the interesting bit.

While it is Rachel's son, Joseph, who commands the next stage of the history of Jacob's family and saves them from starvation, it is Leah's sons, Judah and Levi, who will form and lead the nation of Israel. From Levi comes the priestly tribe, the leaders of the Hebrew religion. And from Judah comes the line of kings—including David, who makes a nation out of the Hebrews. Thus it is through Leah that Jacob became the father of King David, and, eventually, of importance to Christians, Jesus.

While the world may choose the strong, the beautiful, the tall, the thin, the fair-skinned, the intelligent, God chooses differently. Blessed are the unwanted and unloved. Blessed are the ugly, the weak and vulnerable, the poor, the disabled, the undesirable, the unlovable, the female, the used and abused, for from them will come God's blessing. Blessed are those who are left out for they will shepherd the reign of God. And blessed are the people who are somehow saddled with them for they also will share the history of God's work with them. Even the two slaves or handmaidens, Zilpah and Bilhah, had a role to play, for they bore children that were to become four of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The good news for us today is that God uses the unwanted things of this world to bless the world. I think that this is an important message for us today. Many of us may feel that somehow God cannot use us, we are not young enough, or smart enough, we have the wrong type of personality. Whatever,

something is wrong with us, so that we can only ever do little things here and there, things that don't make much of a difference in the grand scheme of things. But this isn't what we hear in today's reading from scripture. Even the slaves had a pivotal role to play in fulfilling God's plans.

This is the same message that we heard in the other two readings for today from the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Romans. In Matthew we hear Jesus speaking to the crowds and saying,

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

God can use the smallest of things to create something amazing. And the choice of the mustard bush was a clever one, for this plant is not like a great oak that reaches to the skies, but more like a weed that spreads out over the land and is often unwelcome to many. Even the birds in bush are unwelcome, for they steal the seeds that the farmer planted. And so it is with the work of the Kingdom today.

In his book, 'What Good Is God?' author Philip Yancey illustrates with an example that is quite pertinent for us today, as it concerns the country of Ukraine, which we heard about so much in the news not so long ago. President Trump was impeached over his conduct regarding Ukraine, and before that Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down by a Russian supplied Buk missile, and before that we heard about the conflict between the Ukrainian government and Russian backed separatists in the east of the country.

Go back further, to the 2004 Ukraine election and we can learn about the reformer Victor Yushchenko, who challenged the entrenched party and nearly died for it. On election-day the exit polls showed Yushchenko with a comfortable lead, but through outright fraud, the government had reversed those results.

Philip Yancey writes:

That evening the state-run television reported, "Ladies and gentlemen, we announce that the challenger Victor Yushchenko has been decisively defeated." However, government authorities had not taken into account one feature of Ukrainian television, the translation it provides for the hearing-impaired. On the small screen insert in the lower right-hand corner of the television screen a brave woman raised by deaf-mute parents gave a different message in sign language.

"I am addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine. Don't believe what they say. They are lying, and I am ashamed to translate these lies. Yushchenko is our President!" No one in the studio understood her radical sign-language message. Inspired by that courageous translator, deaf people led what became known as the Orange Revolution.

Yancey continues:

'They text-messaged their friends on mobile phones about the fraudulent elections, and soon other journalists took courage ... and likewise refused to broadcast the party line. Over the next few weeks as many as a million people wearing orange flooded the capital city of Kiev to demand new elections. The government finally buckled under the pressure, consenting to new elections, and this time Yushchenko emerged as the undisputed winner.'

Yancey makes the following point:

Our society is hardly unique ... like the sign language translator in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, along comes a person named Jesus who says in effect, "Don't believe the big screen—they're lying. It's the poor who are blessed, not the rich. Mourners are blessed too, as well as those who hunger and thirst, and the persecuted. Those who go through life thinking they're on top will end up on the bottom. "

My prayer for us today, is that we take this message to heart, that we focus more of our attention on those the world ignores, and that we may perceive how God is using them to further his Kingdom. Let us take heart that God can use us, yes, even you and me, to achieve marvellous things. May God use each of us to bless this world. Amen.