

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Stories from Genesis
part 2



Sunday 24th May – Saturday 6th June

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Introduction

We often skip through Genesis in our weekly selection of readings in church and it’s not often we take time to read it through in our own private devotions. For the next couple of months we’re going to read most of the Genesis stories. We’re skipping Joseph as we looked at him last year. Here we have stories of sex, power, murder, sin and grace. Written long after the events they portray they teach us about Israel’s understanding of both themselves and God.

1 O praise, O praise the LORD!
Praise him from heavens' height!

2 All angels, give him praise;
Praise him, you hosts of light.

3 Praise him, sun,
moon and stars on high,

4 You highest heavens
and cloudy sky.

5 O let them praise his name,
The name of God the LORD,
For he created them
By his almighty word.

6 He set their place eternally;
For ever fixed is his decree.

7 The LORD praise from the earth,
You creatures of the deep,

8 Fire, hail, snow, clouds and winds,
Which his commandments keep.

9 You hills and trees,
beasts wild and tame,

10 Small creatures, birds,
exalt his name.

11 All nations and earth's kings,
Princes and all who reign;

12 Young men and maidens too,
Both children and old men:

13 The LORD's great name by them
be praised;

His name alone on high is raised.

His glory shines abroad
Above the earth and heaven;

14 And he to his own folk
A mighty king has given.

Let Israèl give praise to God;
They are his people. Praise the LORD!

Reflection

In January 2004 Patrick Moore introduced an episode of The Sky At Night called "The Music of the Spheres". Now, to my 20th / 21st century understanding that seemed entirely sensible. We know the solar system, with its large and small planets swinging round the sun, is blown

by the wind from the sun, battered by stray rocks. It makes sense to us that an object hit by another goes “boing”. It is said that to Pythagoras the sight of a working blacksmith provided a new revelation of the way the vibrations of music are produced. Pliny the elder [77AD pp. 277–8, (II.xviii.xx)] wrote: "...occasionally Pythagoras draws on the theory of music, and designates the distance between the Earth and the Moon as a whole tone, that between the Moon and Mercury as a semitone, the seven tones thus producing the so-called diapason, i.e.. a universal harmony".

The idea that all things can and should praise the Lord may be based not only on poetic imagination but also on the musical theories of the time. With more science and the use of his xylophone Patrick demonstrated the musicality of the solar system.

Similarly, the Psalmist’s use of “sun” “moon”, which might contain an idea based on the mythology of Greece or Babylon, allows a progressive structure to the Psalm in praise of the Lord who creates all. This takes us from angels (greater than other gods), down through the spheres (lesser gods), through the inanimate, to the flora and fauna. The order is similar to that of Genesis ch. 1 reflecting the understanding that all things owe their existence to God. Praise is the proper response, due even from inanimate objects. The voice of each is acknowledged and all are commanded to praise the Lord. Finally, all people are also commanded to give praise.

Prayer:

All things praise thee, Lord Most High.
Heaven and earth and sea and sky,
all were for thy glory made,
that thy greatness, thus displayed,
should all worship bring to thee;
all things praise thee: Lord, may we. Amen
(George William Conder, 1821-1874. CMP 24)

So what have we made of our God given potential? indeed what shall we make of it?

Prayer

‘O God you search me and you know me’,
is the witness of those who seek you.
In your loving kindness accept me
for who I am; and come close
even when I want to distance myself
from you, and remind me that
even I am an inheritor of your promises
for good. Amen

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.'

Reflection

Jacob is caught in a self inflicted crisis. The 'supplanter' is on the run from vengeful brother Esau, whose birthright he has stolen from his blind father Isaac (with his mother's connivance). Family problems are nothing new.

Jacob's night resting place turns out to be restless, but propitious, for his dream reveals the previously unseen coming and going of God's messengers from heaven to earth (and vice versa). Then God comes close to him. Jacob hears the offer of much needed reassurance and promise as to his future. It turns out that Jacob is the inheritor of God's promise to Abraham '...all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and your offspring'. What? Dreadful behaviour, rewarded? A definite 'no, no' in our eyes; but Jacob's name may mean not just 'supplanter', but also, 'may God protect'. God alone seems to know Jacob's full potential. That's true of us too – God alone knows our true potential.

As for Jacob's vow at Bethel, was Jacob striking a bargain with God? We know we attempt to strike quid pro quos with God, so our interpretation of Jacob's words may tell us more about ourselves than we admit. It's possible to understand Jacob's Bethel vow in a much less suspicious way. As a consequence of God's promise to Jacob, Jacob promises to be faithful to God.

Monday 25th May The Three Visitors

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, Park Green and Bollington URC, Macclesfield

Genesis 18: 1 - 15

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,[a] do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread." Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Reflection

From Genesis to Jesus, from Jesus to Paul, the theme of hospitality runs through the Bible. Generous, cheerful, unsparing hospitality is the mark of the people of God and this is extended especially to strangers, foreigners, refugees. The story of Abraham by the oaks of Mamre makes this clear. In the heat of the day Abraham is having a siesta in front of his tent; while he is dozing, suddenly he becomes aware of three men standing near-by. At least he thinks they are men, we know better! This is the LORD! He rushes to meet them, greets them warmly and with respect, and in a rather long-winded speech, invites them to stop, rest, have a foot-wash and a bite to eat.

Sarah his wife, is pressed into action immediately to bake bread with the finest flour; Abraham selects a tender calf and gives it to the servant to cook. A lavish feast, scarcely a snack, is prepared and Abraham waits upon the strangers as they sit in the shade and eat. Then the unexpected happens. One of the men speaks to Abraham, and promises that Sarah will bear a son. It's too ridiculous! Sarah is well past child-bearing age. But miracle of miracles, she will bear a son and through Abraham's descendants, all nations of the earth shall be blessed.

Hospitality brings blessing to the recipient and to the donor. As we welcome the stranger to our homes, our churches, our communities, our nation, we glimpse the possibility of good beyond the bleakness of our current situation. As individuals and churches, we are nourished by God's word and called to respond with thanksgiving to our Lord's abundant hospitality. As we share the feast he has prepared; so we strangers are welcomed with dignity and respect.

Prayer

Gracious God,
You have blessed us so lavishly,
with the gift of life and the gift of new life in Christ Jesus;

Prayer

Living God, you know us completely and love us completely.
Give us the courage to fully be who we are, and to accept others for who they are.

Grant us the humility and empathy to walk the line of honesty and compassion in all of our relationships.

We know we are not perfect, and give us mercy in acknowledging our imperfections, and grace in noticing those of others. Amen

Saturday 6th June Jacob's Dream

The Rev'd John A Young, retired URC minister of Scottish Synod, member of Giffnock URC

Genesis 28: 10 - 22

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?’

Reflection

Planning a murder as soon as a parent dies is probably not on your to-do list, but there are plenty of anecdotes of things being put off until then. Things we feel we can’t be honest about, parts of our lives we keep hidden, or pretences we maintain. Many ways in which we seek to present a mask to those who know us the best.

Some disclosures may cause a shock, but many come as no surprise. The other person may have been waiting for you to mention it. They have known you all your life and couldn’t comprehend your silence, so presented a mask to mirror your own.

It is often the fear of how a loved one will react that persuades us to keep our silence and mask our true selves. We may do it to prevent harm to the relationship, but we are also causing harm by not being engaged completely in it. Being told something soon after it happens is upsetting, but finding out much later can cause irrevocable harm. As in political scandals, the cover-up is often worse.

Secrets and intrigue may fill our TV dramas, but isn’t honesty much simpler in real life? Telling the truth is much more straightforward than keeping track of a web of lies. White lies can smooth out our relationships and complete unfiltered honesty can cause harm, but being real about the big things of life is what we should expect of those closest to us.

Esau probably wouldn’t have taken it well being told his mum preferred his brother and thought Jacob would make a better clan chief, but that disappointment might not have boiled over into hatred by being repeatedly tricked. But what makes for a dramatic story, isn’t always the best way to live your life.

and your Spirit is at work among us,
continually transforming us and our world
according to your purposes of love.
May we in our turn honour you by the welcome
we extend to the stranger and the refugee.
Through Jesus Christ we ask it, Amen.

[Tuesday 26th May Pleading for Sodom](#)

The Rev’d Andy Braunston works with four churches in and around Glasgow

Genesis 18:20-33

Then the Lord said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.” Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?” He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.” Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.” When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

Reflection

We all struggle with prayer - the discipline to find a regular routine, to resist the temptation to think we’re simply talking to ourselves and the logical paradox that we often seek to change the mind of the All-Powerful. These days we’re inclined to see prayer as an attempt to change our minds and attitudes rather than God’s. In this passage, however, we see Abraham bargaining God down; Abraham’s cheek changes God’s mind.

God had decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. We don’t know why but the die is cast. We know their sin is grievous and the author of this story has God deciding to pop into the cities and see if things are as bad as they seem. Whatever happens in the next chapter, it’s clear that God had, in the author’s mind at least, decided to do away with these detestable cities.

Abraham is then cast in the role of haggler - what if there were 50 righteous folk in the city? What if there were 45? Or 40? Or 30? Or 10? Abraham bargains with God and the writer doesn’t suggest that God minds. We’ll turn back to Sodom tomorrow but I wonder if this is an early attempt to understand prayer. I wonder if this is how we often pray ourselves - bargaining, hoping to get a better deal or change God’s mind.

For me prayer is attuning myself to God, taking time to reflect and change my mind and attitudes. Of course in moments of desperation we all ask for things - recently one of my dogs was very ill and I found myself asking God to make him comfortable and ease his sufferings (Ben got better). We should, I think, resist Abraham’s example of bargaining with

a grain of truth: here’s a cheating brother, a plotting mother, a father deceived in his dotage and a family at war with itself: Jacob the smooth crook. The same Jacob who became reconciled to his cheated brother? Fathered 12 sons who became the 12 tribes? Is this the same Jacob who changed his name to Israel and inherited Abraham’s covenant with God? Extraordinary!

How little we know, and how lucky we are.

Prayer

O Lord,
Let the healing grace of your love so transform me that I may play my part in the transfiguration of the world from a place of suffering, death, and corruption to a realm of infinite light, joy and love. Make me so obedient to your spirit that my life may become a living prayer and witness to your unfailing presence. Amen

Oxford Book of Prayer

Friday 5th June Esau and Jacob 4

The Rev’d David Coaker, serving Grays URC and a chaplain to the Moderators of General Assembly

Genesis 27: 41 - 45

Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.’ But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, ‘Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him for a while, until your brother’s fury turns away— until your brother’s anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will

As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, his brother Esau came in from his hunting. He also prepared savoury food, and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, 'Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may bless me.' His father Isaac said to him, 'Who are you?' He answered, 'I am your firstborn son, Esau.' Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, 'Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!' When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, 'Bless me, me also, father!' But he said, 'Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.' Esau said, 'Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing.'

Reflection

I reflect in the middle of Covid-19. Tomorrow schools close, Mother's Day is cancelled, Easter is off (we never agree on the date anyway). Who knows where we will be in the week between Pentecost and Trinity when this reflection is due? If you are still here, please pardon my present laughter. Genesis 27: "I am a man of smooth skin" The NSV translation spoils the joke. Alan Bennett had the best version: "I am a SMOOTH man". I had the luck to be at Oxford when "Beyond the Fringe" was being conceived. Alas, only Bennett survives from that group which satirised the very privileges we enjoyed: Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller. Alan preached the satirical sermon in which life was compared to a tin of sardines. "What we need", Bennett told us, "is the key to peel back the lid and reveal the truth". All done in that wonderful tone of voice which only years of reciting the Book of Common Prayer can give you. A SMOOTH man meant something particular in an Oxford environment – it meant aristocratic breeding, effortless confidence and the prospect of something in the City. When Alan Bennett said it, it brought the house down, especially on us Grammar School boys. It still convulses me whenever I read Genesis 27. But through the laughter I spy

God but, instead, seek to find out God's will rather than seek to change it!

Prayer

Teach us, Good Lord, to pray and to trust in You;
help us to learn your will and give us grace to accept it. Amen

[Wednesday 27th May Sodom Destroyed](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four churches in and around Glasgow.

Genesis 19: 1 - 25

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning." "No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square." But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof." "Get out of our way," they replied. "This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door. But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who

were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door. The two men said to Lot, “Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.” So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, “Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!” But his sons-in-law thought he was joking. With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.” When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” But Lot said to them, “No, my lords, please! Your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life. But I can’t flee to the mountains; this disaster will overtake me, and I’ll die. Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it—it is very small, isn’t it? Then my life will be spared.” He said to him, “Very well, I will grant this request too; I will not overthrow the town you speak of. But flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it.” (That is why the town was called Zoar.) By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

Reflection

This is a shocking story and we’re appalled at the behaviour of the crowd and of Lot, Abraham’s brother. Clearly what God had heard about the city being a sinful place wasn’t wrong. For generations, however,

me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savoury food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.’ But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, ‘Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.’ ... Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. Then she handed the savoury food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob. So he went in to his father, and said, ‘My father’; and he said, ‘Here I am; who are you, my son?’ Jacob said to his father, ‘I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me.’ ... Then Isaac said to Jacob, ‘Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.’ So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, ‘The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.’ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him. He said, ‘Are you really my son Esau?’ He answered, ‘I am.’ ... Then his father Isaac said to him, ‘Come near and kiss me, my son.’ So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said,

‘Ah, the smell of my son

is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed.

May God give you of the dew of heaven,

and of the fatness of the earth,

and plenty of grain and wine.

Let peoples serve you,

and nations bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers,

and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.

Cursed be everyone who curses you,

and blessed be everyone who blesses you!’

In this passage we learn how similar Isaac is to his father Abraham they both made mistakes but they ultimately followed their heavenly father and God blessed them. In the same way we will make the same mistakes as our dads but God our heavenly Father has still promised to bless us too

Prayer

Dear Lord,
Give us the strength and courage to know right from wrong,
In times of need may we remember your blessing over us
Help us to remember how you died on the cross to save us from our sins,
In Jesus' name, Amen

[Thursday 4th June Esau and Jacob](#)

The Rev'd Peter Moth, retired minister, St Andrew's URC Kenton,
Newcastle upon Tyne.

from Genesis 26: 34 - 27:36

When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, 'My son'; and he answered, 'Here I am.' He said, 'See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. Then prepare for me savoury food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die.'

Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, ..." obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock, and get

commentators have assumed the sin of Sodom was homosexuality - after all the crowds wanted to have sex with the male visitors – older translations have the rather more coy "to know them". However, things aren't that simple.

In the ancient world there was an absolute obligation to show hospitality to travellers. This ill treatment of strangers would have been shocking. Then we have the threat of gang rape - and, though the crowds didn't recognise them as such, threatening to gang rape angels is unlikely to be pleasing unto the Lord. Finally, we have Lot who offers his daughters to the crowds to appease them (the effect of this on their loyalty will be seen tomorrow). What type of father offers his daughters to a crowd intent on rape and sexual humiliation? Of course it's hard to reason with a crowd mid riot and the angels' supernatural powers save the day.

We have to be careful with how we interpret Scripture. The generations who assumed this passage was about loving relationships between men missed the rape narrative and the horrific attitudes of Lot. The story does teach us how we can get it wrong and makes us ask how we'd react in Lot's situation.

Prayer

Loving God, we are a strange mixture of hero and coward, saint and sinner, strong and weak.
Help us as we change from glory into glory, to see our blind spots, strengthen our weaknesses, and follow you more closely. Amen.

[Thursday 28th May Lot and His Daughters](#)

Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba's URC, Oxford

Genesis 19: 30-38

Lot and his two daughters left Zoar and settled in the mountains, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar. He and his two daughters lived in a cave. One

day the older daughter said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is no man around here to give us children—as is the custom all over the earth. Let’s get our father to drink wine and then sleep with him and preserve our family line through our father.” That night they got their father to drink wine, and the older daughter went in and slept with him. He was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up. The next day the older daughter said to the younger, “Last night I slept with my father. Let’s get him to drink wine again tonight, and you go in and sleep with him so we can preserve our family line through our father.” So they got their father to drink wine that night also, and the younger daughter went in and slept with him. Again he was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up. So both of Lot’s daughters became pregnant by their father. The older daughter had a son, and she named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today. The younger daughter also had a son, and she named him Ben-Ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of today.

Reflection

When you read Genesis end-to-end, rather than in the polite chunks the lectionary gives us to read in worship each week, you notice quite how much sex and deceit come into the story! This isn’t one of those polite chunks, and you can see why the lectionary compilers didn’t strive to include it - it’s a story of sexual assault and incest, and the writer offers no comment on the morality of Lot’s daughters’ actions, leaving us to puzzle through our reactions ourselves.

Some might argue that the daughters, who don’t even get the courtesy of names, are taking rational steps to protect themselves in a world where single women without relatives are the economic and sexual victims of others. Perhaps. But we are likely to be asking questions about the mental, social and physical health effects of such incestuous relationships - not to mention the impact of unconsensual sex. If this story was about members of our own family or circle of friends we would be horrified.

upon us.’ So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, ‘Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death.’

Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy. He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. (Now the Philistines had stopped up and filled with earth all the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham.) And Abimelech said to Isaac, ‘Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us.’

Reflection

I am sure that, like me, many of you have heard many times people say to you “ohhh, you must be x’s son/daughter!”. Having read today’s passage, I am sure Isaac also experienced this as there are so many comparisons between his life and his father Abraham’s life.

Following on from a famine in Isaac’s time, he wanted to go down to Egypt just as his father had done. God did not want this and so similarly to what he did with Abraham, appeared to Isaac and told him to stay in the land of which God had told him. God then told Isaac about the oath that was given to his father which includes the promise of a land, a nation and a blessing that he has now inherited. Even though Abraham’s obedience to this covenant wasn’t always 100%, God still kept it to bestow onto Isaac.

Isaac also fell for the same evil as his father. Both Isaac and Abraham had a beautiful wife and feared for their own safety that someone may kill them for their wife which is why they both said their wife was their sister. Had someone slept with Isaac’s wife then God would have punished them severely. Isaac though he could hide the obvious to others which is often the case with sin among God’s people.

moments in our lives. We pray that we may support others, helping them listen for your call and see how they should use their gifts and talents. And when we make bad choices, help us remember that you are still with us, and that there is always hope for the future.

Amen

[Wednesday 3rd June Like father, like son...](#)

Reuben Watt, Youth Assembly Moderator and Elder, Reigate Park Church

Genesis 26 1 - 16

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to King Abimelech of the Philistines. The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.'

So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister'; for he was afraid to say, 'My wife,' thinking, 'or else the men of the place might kill me for the sake of Rebekah, because she is attractive in appearance.' When Isaac had been there a long time, King Abimelech of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw him fondling his wife Rebekah. So Abimelech called for Isaac, and said, 'So she is your wife! Why then did you say, "She is my sister"?' Isaac said to him, 'Because I thought I might die because of her.' Abimelech said, 'What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt

But perhaps this isn't the focus the writer is hoping for. Rather, should we be noting the closing point? Here the babies become the fathers of the Moabites and Ammonites, two of the neighbouring peoples of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, occupying northern and southern areas of the modern Kingdom of Jordan respectively, and with whom Israel and Judah fought frequently over territory. By pointing to a common ancestry, is the writer challenging those who hold prejudices or discriminate against those who are different to the intended audience of Genesis?

And, of course, had Moab and Judah not been able to have friendly relations later on, we wouldn't have had the story of Ruth, the Moabite woman who is one of my favourite characters in the Hebrew scriptures.

Prayer

Lord,

When we are tempted to dismiss those who are different to us, or who hold different views, remind us we are all your children;

When we are tempted to take short-cuts to achieve our ambitions, keep us faithful and respectful of your word; and

When we are tempted to read the bible partially, and avoid challenges to our world view, open our hearts and minds to the power of your word.

Amen

Genesis 21: 1 - 21

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring." Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob. God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a

Reflection

Neither Esau nor Jacob come out well from this story - and both behave in ways that they repeat later on in Genesis. Esau, the impulsive, impatient one, throws away his birth right for the sake of a bowl of lentils, while Jacob, the deceitful one, sets a trap for his brother that he knows he is likely to fall into, in order to get the birth right that isn't by rights his. The writer of Genesis seems to have more sympathy with Jacob, than with Esau, who is said to have 'despised' his birth right, but turns the tables on Jacob later on when he himself is tricked by Laban.

I suspect that the idea of a birth right - the privilege of the first born - will feel alien to many of us, and the fact that Esau and Jacob are twins makes such an inequality starker. These men are so different in character and habits, but tradition would make Esau the more important one, whether or not his talents and preferences made him better suited to continuing the family firm than his brother - and the writer of Genesis is pretty clear that whether or not Jacob got his position legitimately, he was better suited to the task of carrying on the family name.

In this first of a series of bad choices Esau begins to carve out a path through life that bucks expectations - and doesn't always go well. If I was Esau's boss I'd be working with him on giving himself enough time to make considered decisions, rather than going with his gut on partial information! But there is also something powerful about the way that he doesn't just follow a path laid out for him by others, that may resonate for the way we have to discern our callings. We should avoid selling our souls for lentils, however!

Prayer

Lord,
We give thanks for the freedom to make our own choices in life. We remember the mentors and advisors, the family and friends, the ministers and elders who have helped us discern our choices at key

However, through all their messiness and power struggles, with bad choices and moments of brilliance, God never abandons them, never stops hoping for them, never stops shaping their diversity nor seeing their potential. If this is a characterisation of today's broad family of the children of Abraham and Sarah, then perhaps we can find courage and hope in our faithstory to keep on trying to be the global family God can see in us, because God will never give up on us.

Prayer

God of Abraham and Sarah

Families can be our greatest gift and sorest trial.

May our families of kin, of choice and of faith,

be spaces where we can safely grow through conflict and calm

to become fully alive, fully accepted & accepting, fully loved & loving,

In the deep knowledge that you will never leave us or give up on us.

Holy family of Three-in-One, in you we trust. Amen.

[Tuesday 2nd June Esau and Jacob 2](#)

Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba's URC, Oxford

Genesis 25: 29-34

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, 'First sell me your birth right.' Esau said, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birth right to me?' Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore to him, and sold his birth right to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birth right.

well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Reflection

How convenient for God's chosen family, eh? Yes they treated Hagar badly. But it all worked out, right? Ishmael gets married and will get his own nation too. No worries!

Ugh...

This story serves the patriarchy really well and aches with the cries of the oppressed. This story teaches men that they don't have to take responsibility for their actions that harm women. God will fix their messes.

The sins of patriarchy, racism, slavery and colonialism (which still plague our world today) infect the relationships of Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah. Hagar had no power, but we have power to decide how we teach her story.

This story should not comfort relatively privileged folk like me. It should remind us that we cannot just do what we want to whomever we want and call it "God's will". Real people means real pain, real suffering. The pain of Christ on the cross was caused in part by people doing what they wanted to an innocent man and calling it "God's will." The Trail of Tears in America and Apartheid in South Africa were caused in part by people doing what they wanted and calling it "God's will." Political discourses today – in many nations around the world – centre on a dialogue of nationalism and oppressing people. Some leaders have the audacity to imprison asylum-seeking children, persecute people of different faith, and murder LGBT people and call it "God's will."

Ugh...

Teach the people that God sees Hagar! Teach that our just and righteous God sees the people who are oppressed by our unjust and unloving actions! Teach that God sees the oppressed and the oppressors! We've got to stop doing whatever we want, expecting God to clean up our messes. For Christ's sake (and for the sake of all the Hagar's).

Prayer

God who sees the oppressed and the oppressors,
We pray that your just ways of doing stuff
be reality in our nations and in our communities.
Help us to walk the Way that Jesus taught, together.
Set us free. Amen.

[Saturday 30th May Abraham and Issac](#)

The Rev'd Michael Hopkins, Minister of a group of Methodist and United Reformed Churches based around Farnham, Surrey, and Clerk of the URC General Assembly

Genesis 22: 1 - 19

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on

heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Reflection

Born of a virgin priestess, visited by a god, abandoned in a river, saved and raised by a wolf, the founders of the city of Rome, Romulus and Remus, is another story of miraculously conceived, empire founding, fighting twins. Told as the founding story of Rome, it characterizes the wonder, the survivor instinct and the brutal determination of the city and subsequent empire.

Genesis shows that in the nations who came from the Children of Abraham, there was family conflict from the foundation. Isaac was not Abraham's first born son (Ishmael was) but Isaac inherited everything from his father. Then at the testing age of 40, Isaac married Rebekah who could not conceive (was God's promise in jeopardy?). After Isaac prayed she became pregnant with Esau & Jacob who fought from the womb (be careful what you pray for?). If we look forward, Jacob's family life is equally loaded with tension and power struggles.

Just as Romulus & Remus offer a character for the Roman Empire, I think these early stories in Genesis offer us a sense of the character of the nation/s Abraham & Sarah's children became; full of diversity, often in conflict, riddled with favouritism, and yet bonded as family in which God makes uncanny choices to rule and lead with the younger, weaker and unexpected ones. This family will eventually spend 40 years wandering through the wilderness for God to try and forge them to be the family and the people God hopes for, but even then...

So why should church be so limited. Why should our praise, of a God who encompasses every aspect of our lives be so sedate? Why do we find it so hard to “let go” and let every part of our being praise God?

Prayer

Give me joy in my heart keep me praising – give me joy in my heart keep me singing. Give me joy in my heart keep me dancing. Lord when we praise you, may our worship be joyful, thankful, inspirational but most of all honest. May we offer our worship with our whole being and let us dance as if no-one is watching. Amen.

Monday 1st June Esau and Jacob 1

The Rev'd Fiona Bennett. Minister of Augustine United Church, Edinburgh

Genesis 25: 19 - 28

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 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. And the Lord said to her,

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

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's

together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided." The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.

Reflection

Today's reading the final, the tenth, and the greatest of the trials of Abraham. It is one of the most brilliantly told narratives in Genesis, and has generated much comment and many works of art. It's a work of psychological sensitivity and stylistic skill in portraying Abraham's distress. We have read eleven chapters of "fall" at the beginning of Genesis, and then Abraham has what might best be described as a mixed

experience with his family and with God. It's an appalling story, but I can see why God felt the need to test Abraham again.

No-one interpretation can capture all the aspects of this story. Perhaps there's something about human firstborn sacrifice, but that was forbidden in Israel and rightly regarded with horror, so that seems unlikely. God had no intention that the killing of Isaac should ever be carried out, but Abraham had no way of knowing that. On a different level it reminds us that although God's promise of an heir has been fulfilled, the fulfilment is fragile and endangered. Our story ends with Abraham on right terms with God, and his child is safe.

Abraham got a great many things wrong, but even when he was very old he was still able to make things right with God, and that was a blessing for him and his family. Perhaps that hope can be a blessing for us, too?

Prayer:

Loving heavenly Father, we thank you for your promises to us. May we journey through life gracefully, fruitfully, and strongly, always encouraged by your Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Sunday 31st May Psalm 149](#)

The Rev'd Ruth Watson Minister in Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership

PSALM 149

1 Praise the LORD! Give him glory and sing a new song.
Praise the LORD with his saints in the worshipping throng.
2 To their Maker let Israël joyfully sing;
Let the people of Zion be glad in their King.

3 Let his people with dancing give praise to his name,
As with harp and with timbrel their God they acclaim.

4 For the LORD in his people takes special delight,
And he crowns with salvation the meek in his sight.

5 Let the saints shout for joy at the grace he bestows;
Let them sing and rejoice while they take their repose.
6 May their mouths be employed in the praise of the LORD,
And their hands be equipped with a double-edged sword.

7 They will punish the nations and captive will bring
8 All the peoples of earth, every noble and king.
9 They will execute judgment commanded by God.
Thus his saints will be glorified. Worship the LORD!

Reflection

Can you imagine the sight? All the congregation up on their feet singing and dancing and playing their instruments in praise of God? What an image that would be, what a joyful vision it would portray to be totally uninhibited in our celebration of worship? When was the last time that such an image was a reality? When was the last time we were so inspired by our worship and our faith that we couldn't help but express it physically and in song?

Traditionally we are a nation of more staid convention. We sing our familiar hymns to tunes that are fitting with not a tambourine or guitar in sight.

Yet all we need do is attend a large rock concert or pop concert or musical evening to see the way that music can capture the heart, the soul, the feet. It is virtually impossible to remain seated at a rock concert and even less possible to avoid joining in the song and the dance that are taking place.