

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Stories from Genesis
part 3



Sunday 7th June – Saturday 20th 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.

Sunday 7th June Psalm 150

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

1 Praise God in his holy temple; praise the LORD in heavens high.	praise him with the harp and lute.
2 Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his majesty. Praise him! Praise him! Praise him! Praise him! Praise him for his majesty.	4 Praise with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute. Praise him! Praise him! Praise him! Praise him! Praise him with the strings and flute.
3 Praise him with the sounding trumpet;	

5 Praise him with the clash of cymbals;
with loud cymbals praise accord.

6 Praise him, everything that's breathing!

Hallelujah! Praise the LORD!

Praise him! Praise him! Praise him! Praise him!

Hallelujah! Praise the LORD!

Reflection

This call to unstinted praise of God is brief and heartfelt. Gone are the calls to obedience, the complaints, the lamentations, and the questions which have characterised so many of the preceding Psalms. In their place, we have the call to recognise God as worthy of all the adoration and love our hearts can muster. We are to mirror here on earth the ceaseless praise of the heavenly host.

What an array of musical instruments, wind, string and percussion, the Psalm gathers to praise God; and dancing too is encouraged. Temple worship in the days of the Psalms must have been noisy and enthusiastic. Not quite URC style is it?

In between the drama of Psalm 1 and Psalm 150 there lies the lived life of faith, in all its innocence, hurt, doubts, suffering, gratitude and joy. The Psalms are among the most honest and unflinching testimonies to the life of faith in Israel. There's no smooth progression from faith's mighty struggles, to the psalm of praise urged in Psalm 150. There's an ebb and flow to faith. For those of us engaged in the life of faith, the psalms ring true to life. Indeed it may be true that only those who are scarred by the battles of faith are capable of fully opening their hearts, minds and voices to the untrammelled praise of the one who is worthy of all praise, God our maker. Let the music commence!

Prayer

We would be open, gracious God,
to moments of respite
from our doubts and struggles,
when your Spirit penetrates our lives
in such a way that all we can do
is worship you, as our hearts lift up
in pure adoration and praise.
For such openness we pray
in the name of your well beloved Son
our Saviour Jesus Christ Amen

[Monday 8th June Jacob, Rachel and Leah](#)

The Rev'd Peter Clark is Minister in the Bridport & Dorchester Joint Pastorate

from Genesis 29

Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, and when all the flocks were

He's a hero - an instinctive "champion of the Little People", isn't he? However, when we look at the two incidents in the scene, we realize that the writer is posing one of the biggest questions we ask ourselves: how much can one good person do? He's able to help the Midian priest's family (which becomes his own family), but not to do anything to change the situation of his people. And there's the rub: who can change the world that is governed by Empire?

The narrator's answer appears in vv23-25: "God can!" These verses are the start of the Exodus narrative, which begins because God hears the "groans and cries" of the slaves. They provoke three things: God remembers; God looks/sees; God takes notice. We're given no indication that God had noticed their oppression until the people cry out and God hears. This is what moves God to active intervention.

We discover two things about our God: God's ear is attuned to the suffering cries of the most invisible and marginalized, because "God is committed to the establishment of concrete, sociopolitical justice in a world of massive power organized against injustice" (Brueggemann). Secondly, we discover an uncomfortable mystery: God's is apparently spurred to act only when we cry out in desperation.

Reach out to God at this desperate point in our history - now. Cry out! Don't hold back. You and your suffering matter to the Exodus God who is changing this world into the Kingdom – the place it was intended to be from all creation!

Prayer:

Hear me, Exodus God! Remember me! Look upon me! Take notice of me! Hear my Hossana: "Rescue me! Lord, save NOW!" Lord, in your mercy, Your compassion, Your power, Hear my cry. Amen.

Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, 'Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?' He answered, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'Surely the thing is known.' When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defence and watered their flock. When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, 'How is it that you have come back so soon today?' They said, 'An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.' He said to his daughters, 'Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread.' Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, 'I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.'

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Reflection

This is "Adult Moses: Scene 1". We're told nothing of Moses' childhood in Pharaoh's palace; we know from this incident that he had never forgotten who his kinsfolk really are. We learn also that he is someone who is deeply sensitized to suffering and injustice, and that his sensitivity and outrage puts him on a collision course with Pharaoh and his slave-Empire.

gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

Jacob said to them, 'My brothers, where do you come from?' They said, 'We are from Haran.' He said to them, 'Do you know Laban son of Nahor?' They said, 'We do.' He said to them, 'Is it well with him?' 'Yes,' they replied, 'and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep.' ... While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house...And he stayed with him for a month. Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?' Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.' So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.' So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her...When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?' Laban said, 'This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the

week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me for another seven years.’ Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife...30 So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, ‘Because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.’ She conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also’; and she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, ‘Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons’; therefore he was named Levi. She conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘This time I will praise the Lord’; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

Reflection

Jacob is yet another of those Biblical characters who is, how shall I say it, less than perfect? He’s a trickster who has deviously obtained both his brother’s birthright and the father’s blessing due to Esau. Not that it has done him enormous good but nevertheless he’s got them. He finds himself having to work for his kinsman, who, it turns out is just as dishonest and tricky, fooling Jacob into working for the wrong wife and having to work a further 7 years for the woman he does actually fancy!

Setting aside, temporarily, the appalling patriarchy of fathers ‘owning’ their daughters, it’s quite satisfying to read of Jacob getting his comeuppance, even if ultimately it does set him up for a final revenge on his father-in-law (spoiler alert!). I do hope, however, that this led to a period of reflection by Jacob and perhaps helped to make him less devious and dishonest in the future?

Pharaoh. Not only did Moses owe his life to these three women, but Israel owed its liberation to them as well.

We do not always know or understand how God works in the world but it is obvious here that God is somehow at work in the actions of these three women. There are not yet astounding miracles to wow us. Yet the message here is that God sometimes works behind the scenes in the shrewd actions of mothers, the love of sisters, and in the compassion of a tyrant’s daughter. Before the amazing miracles there is simply the faithfulness of ordinary people who live their lives under God.

This is a story about the faithfulness of God in the midst of ordinary human living. This story was told because it gives hope that regardless of how bleak the present/future might be, God is able to bring salvation out of despair, life out of a tomb.

God works through people like you and me. God is faithful to and through us! God always uses whoever (and whatever) is available.

Prayer

Ever Faithful, hopeful God

We thank you that you use ordinary people like us, working through us to proclaim your word.

We thank you also that we can always rely on you to be there for us in our times of need. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen

[Saturday 20th June Moses Flees to Midian](#)

Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship consultant, Worsley Road URC

Exodus 2:11-25

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that¹ and seeing no one he killed the

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'

Reflection

One can only imagine the pain and turmoil of parents as they came near the Nile - the watery graveyard of their Think of the anxiety of pregnancy - a wondering fear of whether the baby would be a girl and get to live or a boy facing certain death. The pain of labour giving way to irrepressible joy only to turn to overwhelming anguish that a river of death awaited.

We all know what became of Moses. He led Israel out of Egypt, out from under the bondage of Egyptian slavery. The salvation of Moses was the salvation of Israel. And how was Moses, and thereby all of Israel saved? By the most unlikely of means, in a patriarchal world – three women: a determined mother who was also very shrewd, a daring and quick thinking sister, and a compassionate and persuasive daughter of

And in our present, I find the continuing dishonesty of humanity distressing in the extreme. Consumer programmes and social media alike report and warn of scams aplenty that prey on people's greed, ignorance and/or naiveté in heartless ways. I write this in the first weeks of the Covid-19 outbreak hitting the UK, during which new scams have already appeared, playing upon fears engendered by the pandemic. As if we didn't have enough to worry about!

I do, though, remain of the opinion that our belief system is based upon fairness, justice and kindness. A part of our calling to spread the gospel, is also one to share that ethical nature. Persuading and encouraging folks to be unlike Jacob and more like the giving, helping, supporting, loving Jesus at the core of our faith? Now there is a biblical character who is never anything less than perfect!

Prayer

Lord God we pray in the face of tricksters and fraudsters for the wisdom to see past their deceit

We pray for comfort and restitution for those who have been the victims of such fraud.

And, hard as it is to do, we pray for the perpetrators of such scams, frauds and thefts, that, like Jacob, they reflect on the harm and hurt they inflict, and that they will cease their evil acts. Amen

Tuesday 9th June [The rest of the tribe](#)

Ruth Tompsett, Elder, Newport Pagnell URC

from Genesis 30

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has

withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’ Then she said, ‘Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her.’ So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, ‘God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son’; therefore she named him Dan. Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, ‘With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed’; so she named him Naphtali.

When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. And Leah said, ‘Good fortune!’ so she named him Gad. Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, ‘Happy am I! For the women will call me happy’; so she named him Asher.

...When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, ‘You must come in to me; ...So he lay with her that night. And God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, ‘God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband’; so she named him Issachar. And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, ‘God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honour me, because I have borne him six sons’; so she named him Zebulun. Afterwards she bore a daughter, and named her Dinah.

Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach’; and she named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the Lord add to me another son!’

Reflection

More babies than an episode of Call the Midwife in this collection of birth announcements of Jacob’s children! What can we learn from this story

experiences they will ever have and hold out hope and encouragement during labour and delivery. They have to be both strong and knowledgeable to carry out the awesome responsibility of delivering babies into the world and Shiphra and Puah are no exception to this. In an attempt to cull the number of Israelites, Pharaoh’s brutal order (pre-echoing King Herod’s action centuries later in Matthew chapter 2) is a murderous policy aimed at killing every Israelite boy at birth. This goes against every instinct a midwife would have and so these two find a way of explaining what is really an act of civil disobedience in failing to carry out Pharaoh’s orders. The explanation that Israelite women are strong and give birth before the midwife arrives seems to satisfy the (presumably male) authorities who do not challenge their account and this gives rise to a new policy of throwing the babies into the River Nile instead. The resourcefulness of mothers who weave waterproof baskets and send their sons downstream to be caught and fostered by sympathetic strangers has a wonderful twist as baby Moses is later taken into the Egyptian court itself..

Despite being co-opted as hostile agents of the state Shiphra and Puah become the heroines of the day as they thwart the order and save lives. As Martin Luther King said much later ‘One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws’. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

May we not keep silent when we know things are wrong. Give us the wits and the words to speak out to protect the vulnerable and help save the lost in Jesus name. Amen.

[Friday 19th June The Birth of Moses](#)

Sue Knight, Lay Preaching Commissioner - Southern Synod and Local Church leader, Reigate Park URC

Exodus 2: 1 - 10

Bringing freedom and relief from the pressures of life.
May we leave our heavy burdens at the cross
And walk with your son, Jesus, in real freedom.

Thursday 18th June Shiprah and Puah

The Rev'd Carole Elphick Retired minister. Muswell Hill URC

Exodus 1: 15 - 21

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiprah and the other Puah, 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.' But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.'

Reflection

The television series 'Call the Midwife' with all its grim social background and graphic obstetric detail has been a huge and maybe surprising success as Sunday night viewing even overtaking 'Downton Abbey' in the popularity ratings. Although the stories have moved on from the memoirs of Jennifer Worth who worked as a midwife in Poplar in the East End of London in the 50s and 60s it has, nonetheless, caught the imagination of millions of people as it highlights many contentious social and ethical issues with both realism and honesty..

You don't have to be a parent to admire what midwives do. They accompany women through some of the most intense and painful

of heartfelt emotions over many years within difficult relationships, the experiences of the sisters, and their voiceless servants acting as surrogate mothers?

Leah and Rachel are forced into a toxic situation and conflict is inevitable. There is always potential for harm in multiple relationships. Polygamy might be seen as putting the man in charge of female sexuality: however in this passage we see the sisters manipulating the situation, directing Jacob in order to further their own aims of bearing sons, and in competition for his affection and their individual status and happiness. Although there are many stories of polygamy in the Old Testament, culminating in Solomon with his hundreds of wives and concubines, it seem clear from Genesis that monogamy is God's intent: 'a man shall leave his parents and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh'. By the end of Old Testament history this is being emphasised again as in Malachi 2 the idea of covenantal monogamy becomes the norm. Paul sees the relationship between Christ and the Church as a marriage: a lifelong loving commitment between two individuals. We could compare Rachel's story with other examples of infertility in the Bible and their resolution: this is not the only story in which deception and guile plays a part. Rachel eventually is blessed with bearing sons fathered by her husband, as 'God remembered Rachel'. Both Leah and Rachel clearly believed that children were a gift from the Lord who said 'Go forth and multiply'. We too can identify with seeing children as a blessing from the Lord, even if in today's crowded world smaller families are preferable.

Prayer

God of compassion,
God of loving relationships,
strengthen us in our daily living
that in joy and in sorrow
we may know the power of your presence
to bind together and to heal;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

*Based on a prayer at
<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship>*

Wednesday 10th June Esau and Jacob 5

The Rev'd Dr 'frin Lewis-Smith, Healthcare Chaplain in Salford

from Genesis 32

Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them he said, 'This is God's camp!' So he called that place Mahanaim. Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, 'Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favour in your sight."' "

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.' Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, 'If Esau comes to one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.'

And Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, "Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good", I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, "I will surely

regarding our debt to love one another (Rom 13.8). But things have gone wrong, and some things have become twisted. We often find ourselves carrying burdens that are soul-crushing.

Today's reading focuses on the forced labour conditions endured by the ancient Hebrew workforce. This brutal treatment led to a collective lament to God prior to the exodus from Egypt. Things have not changed in the meantime - individuals, workforces and entire populations still lament and protest about their living conditions today.

Even religious movements can impose soul-crushing burdens. Jesus warned against such purveyors of oppression: "They tie heavy burdens ... on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them." (Matthew 23:4).

But the fault of heavy burdens isn't just the fault of corrupt forces and institutions. All so often, we need little help from others as we expertly lay impossible burdens upon our frail shoulders - including unrealistic dreams or destructive habits, among many.

So the pressure of these unrealistic and soul-crushing burdens, be they imposed by others or ourselves, leads us to the foot of the cross. Jesus invites us to carry his burden, which seems to be impossibly heavy but is significantly lighter and the way of love (Matt 11.28-30).

In the words of the classic hymn: "Leave your heavy burdens at the cross."

Prayer

Father God, we sadly recognise the familiar world of burdens - a world that we created,
Forging harsh work conditions, spiritual oppression and personal choice
Placing impossible pressures on the lives of many.
May you re-create a world as you intended

When we are tempted to judge others on appearances, to have double standards and to collude with patriarchal oppression let's remember Tamar who turned the tables and found her rights and security through seduction.

Prayer

God of Tamar,
help us to build a world where men no longer abuse women,
where women no longer need to sell their bodies,
and where the rights of all are cherished. Amen.

[Wednesday 17th June An Oppressed People](#)

The Rev'd Daniel Harris, ministers in the North Manchester Mission Partnership.

Exodus 1: 8 - 14

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

Reflection

In all fairness, we are supposed to carry some burdens in life. The Hollies' classic song "He Ain't Heavy - He's My Brother" echoes Jesus' own words

do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number."

So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau...These he delivered into the hand of his servants, each drove by itself, and said to his servants, 'Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove.' He instructed the foremost, 'When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, "To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?" then you shall say, "They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us."' He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, 'You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, and you shall say, "Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us."' For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.' So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

Reflection

Two brothers who have not spoken for years, who last met at a funeral, have never met each other's children. Tensions were high when they parted and as God brings them back together there is no trust between them. Jacob fears that his brother will attack. And what will Esau think when he sees these giant herds and flocks being driven towards his lands, not knowing whose they are or why they are coming his way?

Esau readies himself for trouble, riding out with four hundred men to face Jacob's company. We knew little until now of Esau's fortunes, but he too must have done alright for himself to command this little warband.

We know much of Jacob's fortunes, and that he is still tricking his way through life. Jacob's stealing and cheating has just caused a dangerous row with father-in-law Laban who pursued Jacob and his daughters for

seven days and threatened their lives for stealing the household gods as they ran.

Can anything good come from Jacob returning home? His sense of walking with his father's God is growing as he ages. He is hearing and seeing angels (messengers of God) increasingly often. He has heard God call him home. His prayers have some humility now, a sense of vulnerability now. Could there be hope for Jacob yet?

First, he must face that warband. Peace offerings are sent ahead. Jacob plans to let half his herds and servants be captured if things come to a head. Another trickster move. But there is no way Jacob can avoid facing his brother or the consequences of his past behaviour. We don't often end our daily devotion on a cliffhanger, but this is one. A confrontation is coming. Can the trickster or his God find any way out?

Prayer

If you are keeping a score sheet of our sins, God,
then not one of us will be able to stand before you.
But with you there is forgiveness and so we dare to praise you.
We are grateful that with you we can face this day,
Mindful of all the love and kindness we have known from you,
Bringing all that is to come, and all that shall be done to you.

Responding to Psalm 130

[Thursday 11th June Wrestling with God](#)

The Rev'd Carole Elphick Retired Minister, Muswell Hill URC

Genesis 32: 22 - 32

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the

please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.' Then Judah acknowledged them and said, 'She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.' And he did not lie with her again.

Reflection

Levirate marriage (from the Latin meaning husband's brother) is practised in patriarchal societies. The practice of the brother of a deceased man marrying his sister-in-law stems from a legitimate desire to protect women in societies where they are dependent on men for shelter and security (of course allowing women freedom in their own right would eliminate the need for this). In Old Testament Judaism the practice took place if the widow was childless; children would be seen as the descendants of the deceased brother. Inheritance would be safeguarded and the widow provided for. As today's disturbing passage shows, however, it was not a practice that was popular with surviving brothers!

Judah may have been a tad superstitious as Tamar had been married to two of his sons - both of whom died. One can, therefore, understand a certain reluctance to marry off his third son to the same woman. In the meantime Tamar had been sent back, presumably in disgrace, to her father's house but was determined to secure her rights. So in disguise, she prostituted herself and fell pregnant by her father-in-law who was, later, ready to have her put to death for "whoredom." Of course Judah wouldn't see that he had to be put to death for using a prostitute but double standards rarely trouble patriarchs.

Tamar is an early example in our Scriptures of a woman who stood up for her rights, who realised she was being cheated and did something about it. She turned the tables on Judah and on his deadly assumptions - something he had the wit to realise. Most interestingly Tamar is listed in St Matthew's genealogy as an ancestor of Jesus. Talk about skeletons in the closet!

son Shelah grows up’—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father’s house.

In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua’s daughter, died; when Judah’s time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheep-shearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. When Tamar was told, ‘Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep’, she put off her widow’s garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He went over to her at the roadside, and said, ‘Come, let me come in to you’, for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, ‘What will you give me, that you may come in to me?’ He answered, ‘I will send you a kid from the flock.’ And she said, ‘Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it.’ He said, ‘What pledge shall I give you?’ She replied, ‘Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand.’ So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. He asked the townspeople, ‘Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?’ But they said, ‘No prostitute has been here.’ So he returned to Judah, and said, ‘I have not found her; moreover, the townspeople said, “No prostitute has been here.”’ Judah replied, ‘Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her.’

About three months later Judah was told, ‘Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.’ And Judah said, ‘Bring her out, and let her be burned.’ As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, ‘It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.’ And she said, ‘Take note,

man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Reflection

When I was a child, wrestling on TV on Sunday afternoon was a big deal. Strongmen with names like Giant Haystacks threw each other around a boxing ring and scored points by pinning down their opponent so they could not move.

When I first met theology as a teenager it seemed to contain some of the same elements: throwing ideas and doctrines around and wrestling with them in the “wee small hours of the morning” wanting to pin them down and emerge with understanding. Knowledge, as they say, is power so understanding gives us a foothold when thinking and speaking about God.

Jacob however had as little success as we do. His unnamed partner strives and struggles and does not give in. Jacob usually gets his own way by fair means or foul but now it seems he has met his match. This is not toying with a knotty problem but entering into the full horror and exertion of thinking ideas through, reading around and listening intently to other opinions and then acting on it.

We have some outstanding wrestlers in the URC. There are historians, linguists, ethicists, doctrinal specialists and all shades of talented and inspired theologians. But if they have one thing in common it is that they, like Jacob, come away from their encounter with text and faith radically changed. If we wrestle with the text and do not allow it to change us we might as well not bother. As we wrestle with the big questions we can recall that Jacob gains understanding and a new name but not on his own terms. The outcome as Brueggemann writes, “acknowledges the crippling victory and the magnificent defeat of that night”. In Phyllis Trible’s infamous words “as we leave the land of terror, we limp.”

Prayer

God give us grace to wrestle with your Word and be open to the change it will make in our lives. Amen.

‘Jesus confirm my heart’s desire
to work and speak and think for thee
Still let me guard the holy fire
and still stir up thy gift in me’

Charles Wesley (1707-88)

[Friday 12th June Esau and Jacob 6](#)

The Rev’d Martha McInnes, Minister, Cardiff and Penarth Pastorate

Genesis 33: 1-17

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

joy felt in a family at the news of a new birth, or the joy when those children that were separated from their birth mother are eventually reunited. Our 2012 loss turned to joy when through an offering taken at his funeral we could finance the rebuild of a war damaged school in East Africa.

Prayer

Father God, too often we only come to you at times of crisis, forgive us. Help us to acknowledge that we rarely have all of the answers and are often wrong. Forgive us for relying too much on ourselves and not on You. Make us more sensitive to what is going on around us, at home, at work, in church and the local communities both near and afar, Amen.

[Tuesday 16th June Judah and Tamar](#)

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

from Genesis 38

It happened at that time that Judah ... saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him. Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.’ But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, ‘Remain a widow in your father’s house until my

(that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

Reflection

The loss of life during childbirth is a situation that families would prefer not to happen. This is reflected in Rachel's choice for her son's name before she dies. The name she chooses is ben-ori that means "son of my sorrow" reflecting her awareness of her own condition. But Jacob changes the baby's name to Benjamin, that C T Fritsch describes in his commentary, published by the Student Christian Movement, as meaning either "son of the right hand" or "child of good luck". Clearly the birth of a son was an important tradition in the Jewish society, hence Jacob's more positive response to the birth.

One of two interesting TV programmes that reflects on the background to families is entitled "Who do you think you are?" The other being "Long lost families" In both programmes, the highs and lows of family histories are the main focus. Children being separated from their mothers soon after birth because their mother was unmarried. The programmes reflect particularly the mother's anguish as she wonders sometimes for decades what kind of childhood their offspring were experiencing in adoptive homes.

Perhaps our own family histories also reflect times of either great sorrow, perhaps the sudden loss of a loved one, for example, we lost our eldest son to epilepsy the day the 2012 Olympics opened, thus we missed the whole of the sporting events of that year. Or alternatively the

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, 'Who are these with you?' Jacob said, 'The children whom God has graciously given your servant.' Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company that I met?' Jacob answered, 'To find favour with my lord.' But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.' Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.' So he urged him, and he took it.

Then Esau said, 'Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.' But Jacob said to him, 'My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.'

So Esau said, 'Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.' But he said, 'Why should my lord be so kind to me?' So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth.

Reflection

What might forgiveness look like?

A man has his birth right stolen. His brother, the thief, sneaks off in the night, leaving the other behind, hurt, angry and bereft. Years later the

victim receives news his brother is returning, with his family in tow. What will his response be? Have the years hardened his heart against his brother? Does he need to confront him about the theft? Will anger shaped their reunion? Will he punish his brother for the crime? As the thief makes his way toward his family home, these may be the questions chasing around in his head.

What might forgiveness look like?

A man running to embrace his brother, to welcome him home without a need for restitution or explanation; a man running to the brother who wronged him, looking into his eyes and seeing the love they once shared as twins; a man who embraces his brother again and invites him into the family he has been missing, completing the family circle once more.

What might forgiveness look like?

Perhaps examining our own hearts. Taking out that hurt that still lodges there and seeing if we can let it go. Is it appropriate to hold onto the hurt or to forgive? Asking God whether God can remove the hurt from us and create an openness in our hearts which can take the place of the pain.

Perhaps forgiveness looks like Esau, the one deeply wronged, who moves willing toward the one who wronged him, demanding nothing in return. Perhaps forgiveness looks like the “Stranger” who catches hold of us in the middle of the night, who challenges us, wrestles with us and leaves us changed. Perhaps forgiveness looks like each of us, finding a way to live open-heartedly and loving with those around us.

Prayer

God, you move toward us with warmth and welcome. You look us in the eye knowing the pain we have caused and the hurt we carry. You embrace us with love. Give us the courage to wrestle with our hurt,

Help me to be tree-like for God.

Take a moment to read the hymn again, deeply asking for each entreaty to be alive in you.

In our seeking and asking to be tree-like, we are reminded that God is like this for us.

We can give thanks that in the midst of a fragile and volatile world, a tree stands strong at the heart of us.

Prayer

Great God,
tree of Wisdom, justice, plenty, and promise;
teach us the gifts of your grace,
the gentleness of your strength,
and the power of your beauty.

Help us to reflect you in the world,
offering your grace in our words and actions
just as you have gifted your love and grace to us. Amen

[Monday 15th June Birth and Death](#)

The Rev'd Colin Hunt, retired NSM, Member of Hutton & Shenfield Union Church, Essex

Genesis 35: 16 - 26

Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had a difficult labour. When she was in her difficult labour, the midwife said to her, ‘Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.’ As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath

3: Tree of Plenty, feed my soul;
nurture me, and make me whole.
Give me strength, cast fear aside;
let me in your love abide.
Fashion me, O Lord, to be
firmly planted as a tree.

4: Tree of Promise, keep your vow:
with me then, and with me now.
Springtime blossoms, winter tears,
mark the seasons of my years.
Fashion me, O Lord, to be
always changing as a tree.

5: Like a forest all around, so the gifts of grace abound:
flowing waters, fertile sod, sunlit dawn, the Word of God.
Fashion me, O Lord, to be living, giving as a tree.

Reflection

Sitting here looking out of my window at a cherry tree in full blossom, feels like an absolute luxury. The nation is still staying at home to limit the spread of Covid-19 and I am mindful of all those who live in flats or don't have a garden, those with no local park or no one willing to take them to the woods for a walk. The tree described in these wonderful hymn words, suddenly feels like an extravagance gift, out of reach for some.

In Proverbs 3:18, Wisdom is 'a Tree of Life for those who lay hold of her'. In Psalm 1:3. those who follow the way of the Lord 'are like trees planted by streams of living water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.'

I certainly yearn for this to be true in my own life – and yours.
The repeated phrase 'Fashion me, O Lord' is a cry to God; a request – 'fashion me, O Lord':

Help me to be strong and splendid for myself and for others.
Help me to be ever branching and reaching for others and myself.
Help me to be firmly planted
Help me to be open to change
Help me to be living and giving

allowing your grace to shape our move toward forgiveness. As we are welcomed and known, help us welcome and know others. Amen.

Saturday 13th June [The Rape of Dinah](#)

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

from Genesis 34

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, 'Get me this girl to be my wife.' Now Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him, just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.

But Hamor spoke with them, saying, 'The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it.' Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, 'Let me find favour with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife.'

The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. They said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be

circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone.'

Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem. And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter... On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away. And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled...Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.' But they said, 'Should our sister be treated like a whore?

Reflection

According to the proverb, "All power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely". Rape is never about sex. It is about power.

In this passage we see the shift of power from the prince's son; to the brothers; to Jacob; and potentially to the tribes around them. Power often gives its holder the opinion that they have the right to do what they want. Nobody in this story is necessarily right – Shechem was wrong to take Dinah by force then try to take her as his wife. The brothers were wrong to deceive the prince into having all his menfolk circumcised and to deceive Jacob as to what they were planning to do. It would be wrong then for the surrounding tribes to take vengeance on Jacob. But the only person in this story who appears to have no power, yet underpins everything that happened is Dinah. In the times of "#metoo" where women are standing up to abusers and speaking out

about inequality we can often be fooled into thinking that feminism and women's rights are a new thing. While Dinah is a silent character in this story, still she is at the root of this story. She is treated as an object of passion by Shechem and then as a damsel to be defended by her brothers. We do not hear her side of the story. Abuse is never acceptable but by the same token vengeance is never the answer. May we speak up about abuse and injustice without taking matters into our own hands.

Prayer

Lord may all power be given to you. Inspire us to stand up against injustice and speak out about abuse that those who are victims may know their voice is heard. Remind us that "vengeance is yours" so that we are never tempted to take matters into our own hands to avenge a loved one who has been hurt by others. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours – now and forever. Amen

Sunday 14th June Psalm 1

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

Trees - Suggested Tune Dix

Michael Morgan (from Ps 1, 26, 52 and 91 © Michael Morgan admin Faith Alive)

1: Tree of Wisdom,
fruitful, green,
flourishing beside the stream;
spread your knowledge
day and night;
make your law my true delight.
Fashion me, O Lord, to be
strong and splendid as a tree.

2: Tree of Justice,
ever bless;
shade me with your
righteousness.
Teach me how to
live your ways,
and my lips
shall sing your praise.
Fashion me, O Lord, to be
ever branching as a tree.