

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

GENESIS 25:19-34

Two Brothers – God's Grace

The Reverend Paul Kett

Last Sunday, the Reverend Joel Steiner graced us with a fine sermon that focussed on the Hebrew Scripture matriarch Rebekah, her relationship with God, and God's action in her life. I have chosen to follow that sermon with another story from Genesis which we encounter today as part of the regular cycle of readings.

After a few intervening verses telling of Abraham's remarriage after Sarah's death, and the descendants of Abraham's son, Ishmael, we again take up the account with Rebekah and Isaac, and the birth of their twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Some considerable time has passed: Isaac was forty when he and Rebekah married; he is sixty when their sons are born. Some similarities are immediately evident – similarities to stories that form the saga of Israel: Rebekah's "barrenness" reminds us of both her mother-in-law, Sarah, and her daughter-in-law, Rachel, among others. Isaac's prayerful intervention recalls Abraham's similar use of prayer to bring God's attention to their plight. We also come to understand that Rebekah's pregnancy was not an easy one. "The children struggled together within her." In response to her lament, the Lord explained that there were two nations struggling within her; there followed the prediction that these peoples would continue to be divided, and with unequal strength. And, after this seemingly "folk-tale-ish" interpretation, the story returned to Rebekah's present time with the forecast that the older one would serve the younger.

The description of the birth of Esau and Jacob fulfills what was told: Esau is born first, red and hairy. Jacob follows quickly, holding his twin's heel, as if trying to be the firstborn. They are named appropriately: Esau for his colour, Jacob for his action. We also learn that Isaac favoured Esau while Rebekah was closer to Jacob. Another fast forward informs the reader that they are very different in personality as well: Esau loved the outdoors, Jacob was more comfortable at home.

It is this personality difference that drives the incident of the brothers and birthright. Esau, the hunter was willing to forego his status as firstborn, and Jacob the homeboy was quick to capitalize on that momentary weakness. If we can resist making this into a morality tale, where Jacob's character and actions make

him the villain, we may learn something of the hierarchical importance of birth order in the Ancient Near East. The firstborn was the natural heir to both status and property. Esau, from his entry into life was entitled to two-thirds of his father's estate. Jacob, and all those born after the first, were entitled to much less. It seems that Jacob and his mother will stop at nothing short of deceit and trickery to gain these preferments. There is nothing admirable in his actions. And yet God favours him, bestowing on him, through Isaac's action, the birthright and the blessing of the firstborn. Reflection will remind us that Jacob is not alone in this; his father, Isaac, was chosen over older brother Ishmael; his youngest son, Joseph will be favoured by God. There is also Abel, favoured by God over Cain, Ephraim over Manasseh, Jesse's youngest, David, and in the New Testament, the story of the prodigal younger son. In each of these stories, God's grace is bestowed on the one who was not in a position of entitlement. In ancient Israel, and likely other places as well, there was a huge difference in preferment which depended on nothing more than birth order.

The story of Jacob and Esau, like so many others, is etiological in form and nature – that is, it uses real-time characters to speak of past and future qualities of a particular nation or people. This is how ancient Israel understood itself in the world it inhabited, through the qualities and actions of specific characters well known in its history, both oral and later, written. In their self-understanding, God was one who chose and blessed those who had no inherent right to blessing. So, if it was not Jacob's actions that merited God's blessing, what was it? In the longer cycle of the story of Jacob, almost half of the Book of Genesis, we come to see him as one who was highly focussed on God's blessing, a focus that would shape the rest of his life. This blessing brought wealth and family, but also exile, loss, and sorrow.

And perhaps this is a touchpoint for our situation today, as we find ourselves living in the continuing grip of a world health pandemic. Many of us may have had feelings of abandonment, of loss and loneliness. As time passes, and some aspects of life attempt to return to a form of normal, we may well question our ability to return. There are still many "what-ifs" that we deal with, still many uncertainties. Where can we look for that sense of blessing that we have known God to bestow?

Hopefully, looking at the world around us, as it is, but more importantly, how we have experienced it before these last few months, can remind us of the many

ways we have known God's love and grace. Looking at the stories that form our Judeo-Christian heritage, certainly can draw us to our God of love and compassion: the power of God to grant the gift of life in situations of barrenness and despair, the God whose favour is shown in spite of our actions. This is the nature of the God we worship. This is the power of our God to restore. May we know and claim this in these days, and in the days to come.