

Birthright

People talk about ‘the patriarchs’ of the bible - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But as we read the book of Genesis, we learn an awful lot about Abraham, quite a bit about Jacob, but not so much about Isaac. Isaac is mostly known for the story of when God called Abraham to sacrifice him, the story that we’ve had today, and the time when Jacob fooled him into giving him a blessing. But nevertheless, he takes his place as one of the patriarchs, and God is often referred to in the first part of the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Our reading from Genesis 25 today picks up the story of when Isaac, was forty years old, and was married to Rebecca. They didn’t conceive a child, so Isaac appealed to the Lord on behalf of his wife.

God answered Isaac’s prayer... but it took a long time for that answer to come. Verse 20 tells us that Isaac was forty when they married, and verse 26 tells us that Isaac was sixty when Rebecca gave birth. From the marriage, through the prayers, the entreaties to God for an heir, to conception of their children had taken nineteen or twenty years.

Nineteen or twenty years. That’s a long time. A long time to be praying for something, a long time to be waiting, a long time to have faith that God would – or even could – answer prayer.

And when they did conceive, when their prayers were answered, it was not as they probably expected. It was twins! And it was not an easy pregnancy - the twins fought in her womb, “The babies jostled each other within her”. (25:22)

It was certainly disturbing, and quite likely painful for Rebecca as well, she said, “Why is this happening to me?” and prayed for guidance.

When God answered her prayer, it wasn’t an answer with an assurance that ‘everything would be okay.’ Instead, God told her something quite unexpected:

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” (Gen 25:23)

When the twins were born, we heard how Esau, the stronger one, was delivered first – his body all red and hairy. But almost at the same time, grasping his brother’s heel, came Jacob. Jacob, the weaker twin, had lost the struggle to be the firstborn.

We heard that the “...boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.” (25:27)

I think we all have known children like that. Maybe not twins, but siblings, siblings with different temperaments and interests. A tough one, who spends their time outdoors, playing roughly, loving sport, always in the thick of the action. And the other one – the one who likes staying indoors, who has interest in sport or rough play.

But not only were the twins different, their differences divided their parents as well, as we read in verse 28 “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Just like, I think, we want our children to be friends, we don’t want to have favourites among our children. We want to treat our children equally, and yet, well, Isaac loved Esau because he brought him game.

And it’s noted that Rebecca loved Jacob over Esau, we’re not told why. It could be she didn’t like Esau’s roughness, or because she liked Jacob’s company indoors – or at least in the tent – most of the time. And to be fair, it could have been because she saw her husband neglecting their younger son and sought to ‘balance things out’.

We don’t know the details, or Rebecca’s motivation, but we can understand that it wasn’t an ideal situation – it wasn’t a happy family. There were tensions between the twins, there were tensions between the husband and wife.

People often talk about the biblical model for marriage or the biblical model for families, but the families we read about in the bible are often not happy ones. They reflect the realities of the world that we know. We shouldn’t be modelling ourselves on Isaac or Rebecca or Esau or Jacob... but we should be learning from them.

The story continues: “Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!”” (25:29-30)

Esau wasn’t just hungry, but he was ‘famished’, and the implication is that he was very hungry – maybe not literally starving to death, but he may have been out hunting – unsuccessfully – for several days, and not eaten in that time.

Jacob answered, “First sell me your birthright.” (29:31)

Esau said, “Look, I am about to die... what good is the birthright to me?” (29:32)

Now, he may have been exaggerating, but it might have been a reasonable point.

Jacob answered, “Swear to me first.” (29:33)

People often focus on Esau’s apparently foolish decision to give up his birthright for a bowl of stew. “Let’s not be like Esau” we say.... But does that mean Jacob should be our role model?

If Esau really was starving, was it in any way right or reasonable that Jacob demand is birthright in exchange for some food?

Or if Esau was really just a fool, was it right for Jacob take advantage of his brother’s foolishness?

If Esau did the wrong thing, does it follow that Jacob did the right thing?

They were twins, though, so maybe it is reasonable that Jacob share in the birthright, but even if we think that, was it right for Jacob to take advantage of his brother to get it?

If we miss out on something, if we're treated unfairly, do we think it's okay to be a bit underhanded, to take advantage of others, to make things a bit 'fairer'?

In any case, Esau made the vow and gave his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave him some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank and then got up and left. (25:33-34)

The narrative makes it clear: "So Esau despised his birthright." (Gen 25:34b)

We know that Jacob gave Esau some lentil stew, and some bread. By no means an exciting or interesting meal, but certainly one that was satisfying – one that satisfied Esau's hunger - his immediate need.

But on the other hand, what Esau gave Jacob didn't really have an immediate value – while their father Isaac was still living, the birthright couldn't be realised. And the potential value of the birthright was not that much – some land to occupy, some sheep and goats, and not so much as a house – only a collection of tents.

But at the same time, in this transaction – in the "selling" of the birthright – Esau had sold off something of potentially great value (God's promises to Abraham, no less, "I will make you into a great nation" (Gen 12:2)), in order to satisfy an immediate need.

We would never do that today would we?

Yet sometimes we are faced with that temptation. To get an immediate benefit, at the expense of a future one. To sell off those things we inherit from those who have gone before us, instead of saving them for those that will come after.

Is that what we learn from this passage? Is it simply that Esau didn't value his birthright, and that we should be careful we don't undervalue the things that we have?

Often, when we read the bible we learn not just lessons for us, but we learn about people – about ourselves – and most importantly, we learn about God. God who created all things. God who created us. God who people turned against. God who sent his son Jesus to save us – even though we've done bad things like Esau. And even though we've done bad things like Jacob.

So if we look at this passage from that perspective - what do we learn about God from it?

The first thing that we probably note is that God works through flawed people. Isaac and Rebecca were both flawed – they each favour one son over the other son – Esau was flawed – he sold his birthright for a bowl of stew – and Jacob was flawed too – he took advantage of his hungry brother.

So, God works through flawed people. But if that is the central thing to take from this, an awful lot of the Old Testament teaches the same lesson over and over again. The bible is full of stories of flawed people: Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham and so on and on. In fact, it's not until the New Testament that we encounter someone who isn't flawed.

God works not only through flawed people, but he also works despite flawed people. Even in the face of rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden, God put in place a plan to reconcile creation with him, even in the face of almost all creation doing evil, God saved the world through Noah, even in the face of Isaac and Rebecca's partiality to their particular favourite son, God was working through them to establish this chosen people, through whom all the peoples would be blessed.

And not only does God work despite flawed people, but God is patient. He was patient with the patriarchs and the matriarchs, he was patient with the nation of Israel, he was patient with the disciples, and God is patient with us, too. Of course, we should be patient too, just like Isaac and Rebecca were in today's reading – waiting twenty years for their prayers to be answered.

One of the big things I think we can learn from the story of Jacob and Esau is that the true value of things is not always clear – that we don't always appreciate what things are worth. And this works both ways - that bowl of stew turned out to be very valuable!

It may be that the things we would typically regard as low value are of great use to God and the growth of God's kingdom.

What does that mean for how we treat the things we have? Do we give up future possibilities, for what we see as the needs of the present? Do we not use the gifts God has given us because we feel they are insignificant? Do we think our small contributions to the sharing of the good news of Jesus with others aren't going to make much difference?

This passage encourages us to trust God - to know that God has plan - a plan for us as individuals, a plan for us as a community here, a plan for his church, and a plan for his whole world.

We should be faithful. Answers to prayer do not always come quickly or in the ways we might like, but we should be assured, that even if we are flawed, that we do is important, and has ramifications that we will not always foresee.

God is in control and has a plan for you and for me, and not just for us as individuals but also for our whole congregation here at St Ives, and for all people, and for the whole of creation!

We read in 1 Peter that God “has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” (1 Peter 1:3-4a).

The things that tempt us away from that inheritance may not be as obvious as a bowl of stew for us when we're hungry. But they will be tempting. Fame? Fortune? Family? Health? Success? Security? They can all tempt us away from that inheritance.

We must appreciate the value of our inheritance – the living hope that we have in Jesus.

We should never underestimate the value of the gifts that God has given us. Jacob's bowl of stew bought a birthright, and founded the people of Israel.

David, the shepherd boy with his sling, saved the nation from Goliath.

Much later, five loaves and two small fishes would feed the five thousand (John 6:5-15)

But most important of all, in Jesus, the death of one man brought salvation for all.

Amen