

SERMON FOR 26TH JULY 2020 – Ordinary 17A

TEXTS: Psalm 128; Genesis 29:9-30; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

NOTE: It is helpful to read the whole Jacob/Rachel/Laban story (Genesis chapters 29 – 31) as the Lectionary only picks out a couple of episodes. Next week, we'll be reading from Genesis chapter 32.

The courtship and marriage of Jacob and Rachel is one of the great love stories of the Bible. It seems that from the moment Jacob first meets Rachel at the well outside Haran, he is smitten and will do anything to make her his wife. Perhaps, just as well, because he is going to pay a high price for that love. Because whilst Rachel is the girl of his dreams, her father Laban is the father in law from hell! Laban is dishonest, conniving and always on the take. He is determined to exploit Jacob's love for Rachel.

Laban promises that Jacob can marry his younger daughter Rachel, but first he must pay a bride price of seven year's labour. This is a high price, but Jacob loved Rachel enough to believe this worthwhile. The seven years of work, we are told, "they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."

When the seven years was up, Jacob demanded his bride. So, Laban threw a wedding feast, but substituted Rachel's older sister Leah in the marriage bed. Presumably Jacob was more than a bit drunk after the feast and didn't recognise in the dark that he had the wrong woman. But he was certainly upset the next day when he woke up next to Leah rather than Rachel and realised that he'd been conned. Laban then declared that Jacob could have Rachel for his wife, but only in exchange for another seven years labour (although he could take her almost immediately as his second wife)! Jacob truly loved Rachel, so he had no choice but to agree to Laban's terms and keep working.

It seems that Jacob the scheming rogue has met his match in his uncle Laban! We can see that it is poetic justice. Jacob who deceived his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that was rightly his brother Esau's (Ch 27), has now been deceived. We can say that he is paying for his earlier deceptions; however he will not be the only one who will pay a high price.

By Laban's deception, Leah and Rachel become rivals for Jacob's affection. In today's parlance they are abused women (they name their abuse in 31:14-16), used by their father in his bid to enrich himself with no regard for their wellbeing and happiness. Perhaps that is part of the reason they behave the way they do.

Jacob doesn't love Leah and clearly, he does nothing to conceal his indifference to her, but she is the one who bears his children. But clearly Leah wanted Jacob to love her, so she remains upset by his failure to love her even as she has more babies. Her hurt feelings are set out in the names she gives her sons.

Jacob loves Rachel, but she becomes upset by her failure to conceive and takes it out on him. In a move that echoes back to Sarah giving her maid Hagar to Abraham to bear a child, firstly Rachel and then Leah give their maids to Jacob to bear children for them. This did not work out happily for Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael (the child Hagar bore to Abraham), and it does not appear that it will help resolve any of the jealousies and rivalries in Jacob's family. In fact, the rivalries continue to fracture the family even as it grows in size.

There is little joy in this family due to endless circles of jealousy and rivalry. A dysfunctional family dynamic is set up that causes great pain to all in the family. This dysfunctionality will play out tragically in the years to come as the rivalry between the wives is passed down to the children who, in turn, vie for Jacob's affection, attention and inheritance. It is clear in all of this that Laban's deceptive act has produced a harvest of dissent and division. Jacob himself seems to have been strangely remote from the chaos enveloping his family. Maybe he was too busy dealing with the business and farming enterprises, or maybe he saw it as the role of the women to sort out their differences, or maybe he was just self-absorbed and remote.

Meanwhile, Jacob certainly had to keep his wits about him as his father in law sought to further exploit and deceive him in the farming enterprises. Jacob and Laban negotiated several agreements about how Jacob was to be paid for his work, but each time Laban tried to cheat him out of his dues. But Jacob was smart enough to eventually outwit Laban and do well for himself and accumulate vast flocks of sheep and goats. But as time passed, he got increasingly sick of all his father in law's game playing, and he was aware that his growing prosperity was making Laban and his sons angry. Threats and accusations were being directed at him and his family.

God's call for him to return to his homeland came at an opportune time. But it wasn't a happy or easy departure. By the time Jacob and his family leave Haran the bridges have been well and truly burned, and they have no option but to head for Canaan, which as we will see next week, has its own very real challenges and dangers.

So, what may we learn from this story about this foundational family in the history of Israel?

The first thing, which was mentioned last week, was that God works with and uses people who are far from perfect. Clearly, Jacob was a flawed person, as were his wives. He had been conniving and manipulative in his relationships with his father Isaac, and brother Esau, but had reached his comeuppance with his father in law Laban who had revealed to Jacob the high costs of deception.

Hopefully, Jacob has learned some lessons and matured and changed, but clearly, he is far from perfect. He struggles in his relationships with his wives, and fails to create a harmonious family.

On the plus side for Jacob, one cannot but admire the tenacity and devotion of a man who works hard for fourteen years to secure his beloved Rachel as his wife. She is his pearl of great price, won at the cost of all he has to give. There is a great love story, even if their joy in each other is complicated by family dynamics. And it is also clear that Jacob is a hard worker who strives to provide for his family in difficult circumstances, and he uses his all wits to prosper against the odds. And he does seem open to God's guiding and God has been working on him. But God's promises to him to be with him, including those to prosper him and guide him back to the land God has promised him, were unconditional.

We see the beginnings of the fulfilment of those promises of God in this part of the story, especially in the blessing of children and of growing prosperity. God blesses this family in the very midst of its conflicts (29:31-30:24; 30:27; 30:30; 31:3; 31:5; 31:7; 31:9; 31:42).

Likewise, God's promises to us are unconditional, and God works on us, and God can use us despite our imperfections and weaknesses. And God can bless our families, despite their imperfections.

But it must also be said that it is very clear in this story that there is a high and a very real cost for Laban's deception of Jacob and abuse of his daughters, as indeed there is for any deception or abuse. It casts a long shadow over Jacob's family causing immense hurt, jealousy, conflict and disunity. We will see that the costs of this deception and abuse flow on into the lives of Jacob's children causing much jealousy, conflict, abuse and hurt in that generation. The story reminds us why deception and abuse are never acceptable and must be called out and, if at all possible, stopped. We must, in particular, always make sure leaders are accountable and held to high standards of behaviour.

We can also see in the story that God not only blesses this conflicted family, but God also offers guidance to Jacob and his family (see especially chapter 31) and interestingly also to Laban (see 30:29-30). The guidance to Laban was ensure that he knew that he was being blessed by God because of Jacob. The guidance to Jacob included telling him when it was time for him and his family to leave Haran. Through God's Holy Spirit, God also offers us guidance especially, I've found, at critical junctures in life. We always need to be listening to God in order that we may receive that guidance. That is why quiet times are often very helpful as they give God a chance to get through to us. We, like Jacob and his family, need all the help we can get to navigate this difficult world. We, too, often struggled with family conflicts and division, maybe even jealousy. We, too, know what it's like to fall in love, and maybe even to not have that love returned (like poor Leah). We may well have the experience of encountering an exploitive person like Laban and have struggled to know how to deal with it. We can trust that if we pray seeking help that guidance will be given, not necessarily in the way we expect it. For the guidance may come in a dream, or in the advice of a friend or stranger, or through counselling, or through reading a book or watching a show or it might just be in the 'gut' feeling that tells you this is the right decision. God will find a way to get through to us if we are willing to seek and listen.

This story of Jacob, Rachel, Leah and their growing family in Haran is a very human story that speaks to us of God's love and concern for humanity, including us, and surely that makes it worthwhile for us to read and learn from. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev Sandra Houghton
Traralgon/Glengarry/Rosedale Uniting Churches

