

## Reflection for Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Bible passages: Genesis 25: 19 – 34 and Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The book of Genesis explores not just the mysteries of the beginnings of life but also, the origins of Israel, the people of God ---and within that there is a profound exploration of life itself. In today's reading we are introduced to Israel, the man otherwise known as Jacob he who became the father of 12 sons, from whom, according to the narrators emerge the twelve tribes who, in time will occupy the Promised Land.

Page | 1

Jacob is one of the most important of the patriarchs of Israel second only perhaps to Abraham, his grandfather. Yet it is very hard to like Jacob or to admire him. He is far from being a typical hero, and so, probably, all the more believable for that. After many Chapters where the focus is on Abraham, there is precious little breath spent on Isaac. He has a key role in the chain, as Abraham's son and Jacob's father and that is about it. The focus moves very quickly to Jacob the younger of twins born to Rebekah, Isaac's kinswoman and wife. It was the words attributed to Rebekah during her pregnancy which stood out for me as I re-read the narrative last week. The narrator tells us that Rebekah conceives twins and that "the children struggled together within her;" Rebekah said of this very uncomfortable experience ***'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'*** So, she went to inquire of the Lord.

God answers: ***'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.'***

The struggle, then, is to continue. Yes, the struggle which Jacob has with Esau his older twin brother, but more importantly the struggle which Jacob will have with being God's servant Jacob's struggle indeed – with God. And running through the whole ensuing narrative we can say that Rebekah's question still hangs in the air. ***'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'***

It's an existential question which is also universal, most of us get to it some time or another.

On the wall behind me is a framed copy of George Herbert's most well-known poem ***"Love bade me welcome"*** It was given to me when I left my last congregation as a kind of post-script to an earlier gift of the collected poems of the same man. George Herbert achieved considerable distinction, academically and in state affairs during the reign of King James, the

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6<sup>th</sup> of Scotland and First of the UK. Yet Herbert ended life as a humble country parson, evidence of the internal struggle within him --- which went on all of his life.

For some time, it seemed to Herbert that the struggle was between giving his life to God in Christ – or – pursuing the worldly wealth and prestige which was within his grasp. But in time Herbert came to realise that the true internal struggle, which continued after he became a clergyman, was between his own will ---- and the will of God. Herbert came to realise that the three words towards the beginning of the Lord's Prayer --- **Thy will be done** – contain the essence of the struggle that is the life of discipleship. And he came to see that the struggle is essential --- absolutely vital to true life. Over the years that truth has dawned on me too – but I am slow on the uptake.

Page | 2

I remember standing in the coffee queue while at New College, studying for the BD. I was halfway through a seminar on St Augustine and his writings on free will. I was perplexed – not just by the complexity of his argument, but by the issue itself, and my Adviser of Studies came past. He was a Franciscan, an Irishman with more than a bit of the mystic about him. **“You look as though you are wrestling with something Brian”** he said cheerfully. I told him why. **“Good! Good!”** he said – and off he went. At the time it didn't feel good at all, nor his cheerful response helpful. But --- wise man that he was --- he knew the essential nature of the struggle – if we are to deepen our relationship with God.

The Gospel passage today is probably one of the best known of Jesus' parables. It is one of which I often think in relation to the spiritual struggle. Fundamentally, those places where the seed will not flourish and bear fruit are those places which are untended, neglected. The good soil has been disturbed, over and over, through which it is made ready to receive the seed. It is making the soil ready and tending it thereafter that is our primary calling as disciples. First our own soil ---- then the wider context.

Which takes us back to Jacob. There is not much to like about Jacob – he is conniving, exploitative, deceitful and more. Yet, as you read the account of his fleeing from Esau, having cheated his brother out of Isaac's blessing, and then of his battle with his uncle Laban to

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secure the hand of Rachel as his wife, a struggle in which they each try to outwit the other – --in all of this you see that Jacob suffers, and that in this suffering he has profound experiences of God. He hears God's assurance that he is the one who will be the Father of a nation, yet he struggles to believe it----- as everything seems to work against that – and the only success he seems to have is by his own deviousness – albeit that the same deviousness brings him into danger and great anxiety.

Page | 3

The narrative comes to its crescendo in a few chapter's time, where having escaped the clutches of Laban and secured both wives and fortune Jacob faces the return to his father Isaac --- and more significantly – a showdown with Esau. It is on the very eve of that showdown, fearful that his life is about to end, and so, all of his dreams based upon God's promises, that, alone in the darkness Jacob encounters a man who is intent upon stopping Jacob going forward. They engage in a wrestling match which goes on all night – neither one prevailing. As dawn approaches the mystery man asks Joseph to let him go. He does not – it seems – want to be visible in the daylight. Somehow sensing that he is struggling with God himself – and in the desperation of his situation as he contemplates meeting Esau – Jacob refuses to let go, unless and until he receives a blessing. He does --- along with a wound which causes him to limp thereafter, but as the dawn rises so do Jacob's fortunes. Jacob is reconciled with Esau and a whole new future opens up before him.

What – it seems --- is important and commendable about Jacob, is not his piety or his character, not his faith or his integrity, but his dogged refusal to let go of God's promise – --- even when it seems the most forlorn of hopes. This doggedness is born, ultimately, of one thing, his desperation to live and to prosper. In a sense we can say that Jacob is the answer to his mother Rebekah's question. ***'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'*** This way is the struggle, and it is the struggle which under God's grace makes all possible.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen